

Read the attached article and answer this prompt in a well constructed response on a separate piece of paper.

Picture Prompt | Children and Cell Phones

By Katherine Schulten August 8, 2016 4:34 am

A Times article says that, on average, children are getting their first smartphones around age 10.

That is down from age 12 in 2012.

Is that too young? Why or why not? Tell us by posting a comment.

Then, read the related article to learn more.

Note to teachers: We are experimenting this month by posting these daily, accessible image-driven writing prompts that link to related Times articles.

Let us know what you think and how you might use them. Should we add this feature to our regular lineup for the fall?

Due Thursday 3/8/18

PERSONAL TECH

What's the Right Age for a Child to Get a Smartphone?

Tech Fix

By BRIAN X. CHEN JULY 20, 2016

NOT long ago, many parents wondered at what age they should give their child full access to the car keys. Nowadays, parents face a trickier question: At what age should a child own a smartphone?

The smartphone, after all, is the key to unfettered access to the internet and the many benefits and dangers that come with it. But unlike driving a car, which is legal in some states starting at the age of 16, there is no legal guideline for a parent to determine when a child may be ready for a smartphone.

The topic is being increasingly debated as children get smartphones at an ever younger age. On average, children are getting their first smartphones around age 10, according to the research firm Influence Central, down from age 12 in 2012. For some children, smartphone ownership starts even sooner — including second graders as young as 7, according to internet safety experts.

“I think that age is going to trend even younger, because parents are getting tired of handing their smartphones to their kids,” said Stacy DeBroff, chief executive of Influence Central.

The downward age creep is meeting resistance. James P. Steyer, chief executive of Common Sense Media, a nonprofit organization that reviews content and products for families, has a strict rule for his family: His children get a smartphone only when they start high school — after they have learned restraint and the value of face-to-face communication.

But Mr. Steyer added that other parents might decide that their children are ready sooner. “No two kids are the same, and there’s no magic number,” he said. “A kid’s age is not as important as his or her own responsibility or maturity level.”

So how do you determine the right time? To come up with some guidelines, I interviewed internet safety experts and combed through studies on smartphone use among children. I also asked for parents’ advice on regulating smartphone use and keeping children safe.

The takeaway will not please smartphone makers: The longer you wait to give your children a smartphone, the better. Some experts said 12 was the ideal age, while others said 14. All agreed later was safer because smartphones can be addictive distractions that detract from schoolwork while exposing children to issues like online bullies, child predators or sexting.

“The longer you keep Pandora’s box shut, the better off you are,” said Jesse Weinberger, an internet safety speaker based in Ohio who gives presentations to parents, schools and law enforcement officials. “There’s no connection to the dark side without the device.”

The Research

Let’s start with some of the data. Ms. Weinberger, who wrote the smartphone and internet safety book “The Boogeyman Exists: And He’s in Your Child’s Back Pocket,” said she had surveyed 70,000 children in the last 18 months and found that,

on average, sexting began in the fifth grade, pornography consumption began when children turned 8, and pornography addiction began around age 11.

In a separate study published this year, Common Sense Media polled 1,240 parents and children and found 50 percent of the children admitted that they were addicted to their smartphones. It also found that 66 percent of parents felt their children used mobile devices too much, and 52 percent of children agreed. About 36 percent of parents said they argued with their children daily about device use.

There is also biology to consider. The prefrontal cortex, a part of the brain that controls impulse, finishes developing in the mid-20s. In other words, parents should not be surprised if younger children with smartphones lack impulse control.

Pros and Cons

Smartphones undoubtedly bring benefits. With the devices, children gain access to powerful apps, including education tools for studying, chat apps for connecting with friends and the wealth of information on the web.

But they also are one step closer to distracting games, sexting apps and social media apps where online bullies are on the prowl. Even older children are not immune: Last year, at least 100 students at a Colorado high school were embroiled in a scandal that involved trading naked pictures of themselves on their mobile devices.

In the end, such cons may outweigh the pros, Ms. Weinberger said. If you hold off giving smartphones to children, many still have access to technology tools through devices like computers and tablets, she added. The main difference with a smartphone is that it is with a child everywhere, including outside of parental supervision.

Teaching Responsibility

Ultimately, parents will determine when their child truly needs a smartphone.

3 When that time comes, there are approaches for testing the waters before handing one to the child.

One popular option is to start the child off with dumbed-down mobile devices, like feature phones that can only send text messages or place phone calls, and to assess whether they can use those devices responsibly.

Lynn Muscat, a parent in San Francisco, said she had considered buying a “dumb phone” for her 10-year-old son to keep in touch while he was at summer camp. She ended up buying the LG GizmoGadget, a Verizon smartwatch that has calling and texting capabilities and a locked-down list of contacts so that her son could interact only with people she had approved.

Ms. Muscat said she did not consider buying her child a smartphone partly because she felt the device would make him a target for muggers. She also was not appreciative of how smartphones had affected other children around him.

“It drives me nuts when I see his friends on it all the time — it seems very antisocial,” Ms. Muscat said. She said she planned to use the smartwatch to teach the responsibilities of using a mobile device safely before her son eventually earns the privilege of carrying a smartphone.

When you decide that it’s time to bestow a smartphone on your child, there are ways to set limits. To help parents enforce rules consistently, Ms. Weinberger has published a family contract listing the rules of smartphone use, which includes promises never to take nude selfies and never to try to meet strangers from the internet in real life. Parents state what the consequences are for breaking the rules, and the child must sign the contract before receiving a smartphone.

Mr. Steyer of Common Sense Media said he set other limits, like no smartphones at the dinner table and no phones in the classroom. If his children break the rules, he takes their phones away.

Parental Controls

There are some phone settings that can help keep children safe when they do get smartphones.

For iPhones, Apple offers a switchboard full of features that parents can enable or disable, including the ability to restrict the Safari browser from gaining access to adult content and the ability to prevent apps from using cellular data. The iPhone's parental controls live inside the Settings app in a menu labeled Restrictions.

Android phones lack similar built-in parental control settings, though there are many apps in the Google Play app store that let parents add restrictions. Ms. Weinberger highlighted the app Qustodio, which lets parents monitor their children's text messages, disable apps at certain times of day or even shut off a smartphone remotely. While that can be an aggressive approach to restricting a child's smartphone, Ms. Weinberger said her job as a parent was not to make her children like her.

“My only job as a parent is to prepare you for the day you leave,” she said. “If that's the case, I have to keep you safe, and you're not going to like some of the things I say — and that's O.K.”

A version of this article appears in print on July 21, 2016, on Page B7 of the New York edition with the headline: Would You Let Your Child Have One of These?.

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