

## WHAT DOES SCIENCE TELL US?



# 10. Start with Prevention if Possible

**M**uch of what we discuss in this Guide is related to identifying and addressing digital media overuse or addiction once it has begun. While it's never too late to address digital media addiction, an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. So, we also want to equip parents/caregivers with information about how to engage in preventive efforts before the problem starts.

A June 2025 *Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA)* article revealed why many experts in the field of technology suggest that the best means of addressing screen addictions is to focus on prevention.<sup>1</sup> The article followed the health trajectory of more than 4,200 kids, ages 9 and 10 years, for four years. Disturbingly, as Christina Dinur of Smartphone Free Childhood US summarized: “The study found that it’s

highly likely kids who use these products will become addicted to them, and that addictive use is associated with suicidal behavior and ideation.”<sup>2</sup> Nearly one in two kids demonstrated “high addictive use” to mobile phones, while more than 40% of kids showed “high addictive use” to video games. One in three kids demonstrated “increasing addictive use” to social media. “High” and “increasing” addictive use of mobile phones and social media were associated with a 2–3 times greater risk of suicidal behavior and suicidal ideation. In conclusion, the JAMA study demonstrated how prevention strategies could head off disturbing problems such as children’s suicidal thoughts and behavior before they start.

Below are potential prevention strategies that may be useful to implement in your household:

- **Delay the introduction of smartphones, social media, and video games in children’s lives as long as possible.** What’s the best age to introduce these technologies? It depends on your child, their demonstrated maturity and ability to abide by limits/boundaries, and your unique family situation. Survey data from over 200 professionals who work with youth suggest that 16 may be an appropriate age for some youth to have their own smartphone, but some still may not be ready.<sup>3</sup> These decisions should be made on a case-by-case basis.
- **To delay the introduction of technology in your child’s life, you must develop other ways to meet their needs of belonging and connection.** Have discussions with parents of your children’s peers about how your child can communicate in a way that keeps them connected to their social circle (e.g., call on a phone that is not connected to the internet, send a text or email). Consider looking to organizations such as ScreenStrong<sup>4</sup> and Smartphone Free Childhood US<sup>5</sup> for guidance on how to delay giving your child a device.
- **Seek out other families who share your concerns and have similar limits with technology and digital media use in their homes.** Organize gatherings with these families (e.g., at your home, at a park, at a restaurant). It is helpful for your child to know there are other families who share the same concerns and have similar rules related to digital media.

- **Provide age-appropriate education about digital media use, its effects, and the techniques Big Tech uses to keep us online longer than we intend.** Empower your child with information about digital media and the multibillion dollar business model behind it in order to increase their understanding of why your household has certain rules.
- **Complete the Family Digital Media Plan together to provide clear guidance.**
- **Rather than focusing on what your child cannot do, focus on what they can do!** Children’s brains develop from diverse, enriching *experiences*.<sup>6</sup> When children are on devices, consider all of the things they are *not* doing that could aid in brain development, the cultivation of new interests, fostering new skills, and making new connections with others. Ensure your child has opportunities for: physical activity, imaginative/creative play, social interactions, outdoor experiences in nature, educational/learning opportunities, the appropriate amount of sleep, eating healthy meals, and even unstructured time (where they learn that they can tolerate boredom). When days are full of enriching experiences, the absence of digital media is less noticeable.

Please remember it is not too late if your child or teen already has a smartphone or gaming device or even is showing signs of developing an unhealthy relationship with it. Explain to your child that new information is emerging about the harm these devices can cause, and you are taking actions to protect them. Emphasize that these changes are not their fault and that you are instituting new rules because you love them and want

what is best for them. Look to the “Preparing for Backlash or Withdrawal” of this Guide to address potential safety concerns when setting limits on kids’ devices.

**Scan for full Guide and resources**



## References

1. Xiao, Y., Meng, Y., Brown, T. T., Keyes, K. M., & Mann, J. J. (2025). Addictive screen use trajectories and suicidal behaviors, suicidal ideation, and mental health in US youths. *JAMA*, 334(3), 219–228. <https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.2025.7829>
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3. Giordano, A. L., Ramsay-Seaner, K., Letcher, A., Crawford, C., & Kim, Y. (under review). Most concerning youth risk behaviors: A survey of professionals who work with youth.
4. ScreenStrong. (2025). *Home*. <https://screenstrong.org/>
5. Smartphone Free Childhood U.S. (2025). *Home*. <https://www.smartphonefreechildhoodus.com/>
6. Siegel, D. J. (2012). *The developing mind: How relationships and the brain interact to shape who we are* (2nd ed.). Guilford Press.

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