

The Case for Delaying Smartphone Use in Children: An In-Depth Analysis

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PRESENTATION

Wait Until Later

Introducing Waiting until Later by Emily Pryor

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The slide features a large purple speech bubble containing a photograph of four diverse children (two boys and two girls) standing in a circle and holding hands. The background is white with a purple accent on the right side. The text is in a clean, sans-serif font.

Introduction

The "Wait Until Later" initiative, led by the Wait Until Later TASIS Parent Team seeks to inform parents about the potential risks of early smartphone exposure. The initiative provides scientific insights into how smartphones impact children's cognitive, emotional, and social development. This paper expands on the key points presented in the accompanying slides, offering an in-depth understanding of the movement's rationale.

The Need for Delay

Why I Joined the Movement

In my role as a psychologist at PsycApps, the company I founded, which designs evidence-based digital mental health prevention and early intervention tools, I have access to real-time mental health data from thousands of young people.

This data consistently shows a strong link between early smartphone exposure and negative outcomes in children. These effects range from diminished attention spans and reduced academic performance to increased risks of mental health issues. Children lack the ability to regulate their digital consumption effectively, making it crucial for parents to guide them in this process. Without parental psychoeducation, young users are exposed to digital environments that can shape their behavior in ways that may be difficult to reverse.

The Child's Brain Development

Understanding Cognitive Maturation

Brain development occurs in stages, with the prefrontal cortex (PFC), responsible for impulse control and decision-making, taking many years to mature. In childhood (0–12 years), children rely heavily on the amygdala, the emotional center of the brain, making them more prone to impulsivity. During adolescence (12–18 years), the brain undergoes extensive restructuring, but the limbic system, which governs emotions and rewards, develops faster than the PFC, leading to an increase in risk-taking behaviors. By young adulthood (18–25 years), the PFC reaches full maturity, enabling individuals to make more rational decisions and regulate their impulses effectively.

This effectively means that we **cannot expect** children to make healthy decisions around smartphone usage: as parents we are practically their external pre-frontal cortex that need to regulate their exposure *for* them.

What Can the Child's Brain Actually Do?

Development Timeline:

- Childhood (0–12 years):** The PFC is still immature, and children rely more on the amygdala (the emotional center of the brain) for decision-making, making impulse control weak.
- Adolescence (12–18 years):** The brain undergoes massive restructuring, but the limbic system (reward/emotion center) develops faster than the PFC. This explains why teens are more prone to impulsive decisions and risk-taking.
- Young adulthood (18–25 years):** The PFC continues refining, especially in areas linked to self-regulation, planning, and resisting temptations. By the mid-20s, most people reach full cognitive maturity in these areas.

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The Impact of Smartphones on Performance

Key Findings from Research

Scientific studies have demonstrated that smartphone use negatively affects cognitive performance. The presence of a smartphone can lead to a 9.27% decrease in attention performance, a 10.25% reduction in work speed, and lower retention of learned material. This means that children who use smartphones frequently may struggle to focus on tasks, complete assignments efficiently, and retain important information for future use.

Research also indicates that academic performance can decline by as much as 5%, equivalent to a half-letter grade difference, when students divide their attention between screens and schoolwork.

This half-grade can be the difference between getting into the university of their dreams or not.



The Impact of A Smartphone on Performance

- Lower attention¹ (9.27%)
- Lower work speed¹ (10.25%)
- Lower retention of learned content
- Lower performance² (5% or half a grade)



Skowronek, J., Wilentz, A. & Lindberg, S. The mere presence of a smartphone reduces basal attentional performance. *Sci Rep* 13, 9881 (2023). <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-05206-4>

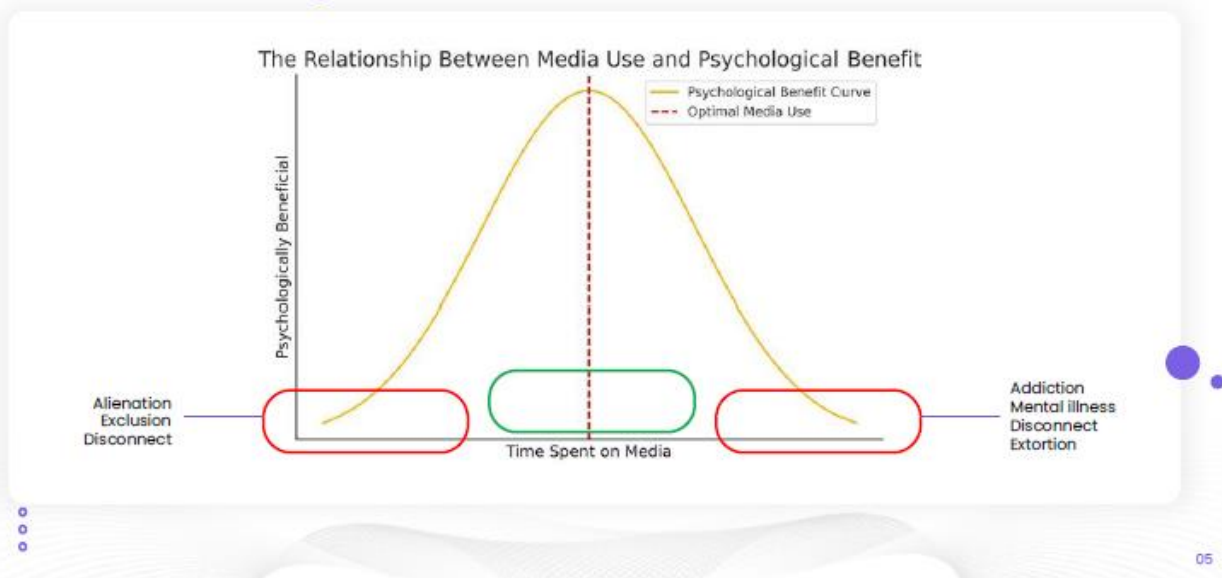
Okon, A. L. & King, M. (2016). Dividing attention in the classroom reduces exam performance. *Educational Psychology*, 34(1), 249-256. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02643758.2015.1060000>

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Evaluating Screen Time: Is All Media Bad?

While not all digital engagement is harmful, excessive screen use can lead to social alienation, increased mental health risks, addiction, and emotional disconnection. Children who spend too much time on screens may feel excluded from real-world interactions, struggle with forming meaningful relationships, and become vulnerable to online exploitation. However, when used in a structured and limited manner, media can offer educational value and entertainment without negatively impacting well-being.

Is All Media Usage Bad?

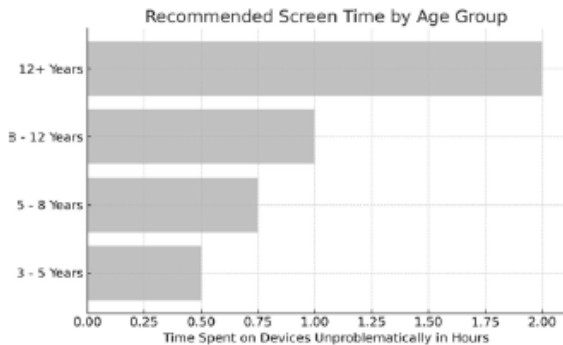


Quality Over Quantity: The Risk of Overuse

Studies show that children who use screens for more than seven hours a day are twice as likely to develop anxiety or depression compared to those who use screens for only one hour. Even moderate use, around four hours per day, has been linked to a decline in overall well-being. Additionally, exposure to inappropriate or harmful content can happen in mere minutes, which is why delaying smartphone access can prevent children from experiencing negative long-term psychological effects. There is NO benefit in allowing any child access to media more than 2 hours a day.



Unproblematic Device Usage



Twenge JM, Campbell WK. Associations between screen time and lower psychological well-being among children and adolescents: Evidence from a population-based study. *Prev Med Rep.* 2018 Oct 18;22:271-283. doi: 10.1016/j.pmedr.2018.10.003. PMID: 30406005; PMCID: PMC6214874.



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Still: Quality Trumps Quantity



High users (7+ hours/day) are over twice as likely to be diagnosed with depression or anxiety compared to low users (1 hour/day). Moderate use (4 hours/day) is also associated with reduced well-being



Exposure to materials that will impact your kids lives for years can happen in minutes (Peer exposure) - Thus "Wait Until Later"



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Benefits of Delaying Smartphone Access

For Parents

Delaying smartphone access reduces the need for constant monitoring and negotiations over screen time. Parents who enforce digital boundaries early on experience fewer conflicts with their children and can create a home environment that prioritizes face-to-face interactions. Additionally, being part of a community of like-minded parents can provide valuable support and shared strategies for handling digital challenges.

For Children

Children who delay smartphone use tend to experience improved mental well-being, stronger real-world social skills, and better academic performance. Without the distraction of social media and online gaming, they can develop meaningful relationships and engage more fully in their education. Reduced screen exposure also leads to a lower likelihood of cyberbullying and FOMO (fear of missing out), helping children feel more secure in their offline lives.

Benefits of Delaying



For the Parents

- No need to be hypervigilant
- No need to have daily fights about boundaries
- No need to discuss why your kid is the odd one out (new normal)
- A community of parents who need to have active lives (you're not alone)



For the Children

- Less probability of mental illness
- Higher wellbeing
- Stronger social skills & real-world interactions
- Higher academic performance & focus
- Less fomo
- Less bullying



Alternative Communication Tools

Basic Phones (Talk & Text Only)

Basic phones, such as the Nokia 3310, Light Phone, or Gabb Phone, provide a communication option without the distractions of the internet and social media. These phones allow children to make calls and send texts while avoiding the risks associated with smartphone use, such as addiction and digital overexposure. They also have longer battery life and are more affordable than smartphones.



The infographic is titled "Basic Phones (Talk & Text Only - Pre-Uber)". It features a list of phone models and their benefits. To the right of the text is a photograph of a black Nokia 3310 mobile phone with a green screen displaying "NOKIA" and "Menu". The background of the infographic is white with a purple circular graphic behind the phone image.

Best for: Communication without distractions

- Nokia 3310 / Light Phone / Punkt MP02
- Gabb Phone (No internet, no social media, just calls & texts)
- Bark Phone (Parental control-focused phone with call & text options)

Benefits:

- No internet access (prevents distractions & social media addiction)
- Allows calls & texts for safety and emergencies
- Longer battery life
- Less expensive than smartphones

Smartwatches for Kids

Smartwatches, like the Garmin Bounce, Gabb Watch 3, TickTalk 4, and AngelSense Watch, offer an alternative to smartphones by allowing limited communication and GPS tracking. These devices enable parents to stay connected with their children while restricting access to social media and web browsing. However, some models may still serve as a source of distraction, so their use should be carefully managed.



Smartwatches for Kids



Best for: Safe communication & tracking without social media

- Garmin Bounce (GPS tracking, no web browsing)
- Gabb Watch 3 (Simple communication, location tracking, no apps)
- TickTalk 4 (Voice/video calling, parental control)
- AngelSense Watch (For kids needing extra safety monitoring)



Benefits:

- Parents can track location with GPS
- Limited calling/messaging only to approved contacts
- Sometimes no social media or YouTube (avoids digital addiction)
- Waterproof & kid-friendly

CON: Distractors



Family Phones with Parental Controls

Family phones such as the Pinwheel, Troomi, and Wisephone introduce children to technology in a controlled manner. These phones allow only educational and parent-approved apps, preventing access to addictive content and social media. They help children learn responsible technology use without exposing them to the full risks of smartphone addiction.

Family Phones with Strict Parental Controls



Best for: Older kids who need gradual introduction to tech

- Pinwheel Phone (Allows only educational & parent-approved apps)
- Trooml Phone (No social media, flexible parental settings)
- Wisephone (Simple interface, no addictive apps)



Benefits:

- No social media, addictive apps, or internet browsing
- Parents control what apps and features are allowed
- Safe introduction to tech responsibility



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iPads/Tablets with Parental Controls

For parents who prefer to introduce their children to technology through controlled access, tablets like the Amazon Fire Kids Tablet, iPad with Screen Time settings, or Kano PC provide a safer alternative. These devices can be used for educational purposes, reading, and creativity while limiting exposure to harmful online content. With parental controls in place, children can benefit from digital learning tools without the downsides of excessive screen time.

iPads or Tablets with Parental Controls



Best for: Limited digital exposure with education in mind

- Amazon Fire Kids Tablet (Strict parental controls & educational apps)
- iPad with Screen Time settings (For controlled use)
- Kano PC (A build-it-yourself educational tablet)



Benefits:

- Larger screen reduces eye strain compared to smartphones
- No cellular data (can be Wi-Fi-only for controlled access)
- Can block social media & install only learning apps
- Used for homework, reading, and creativity



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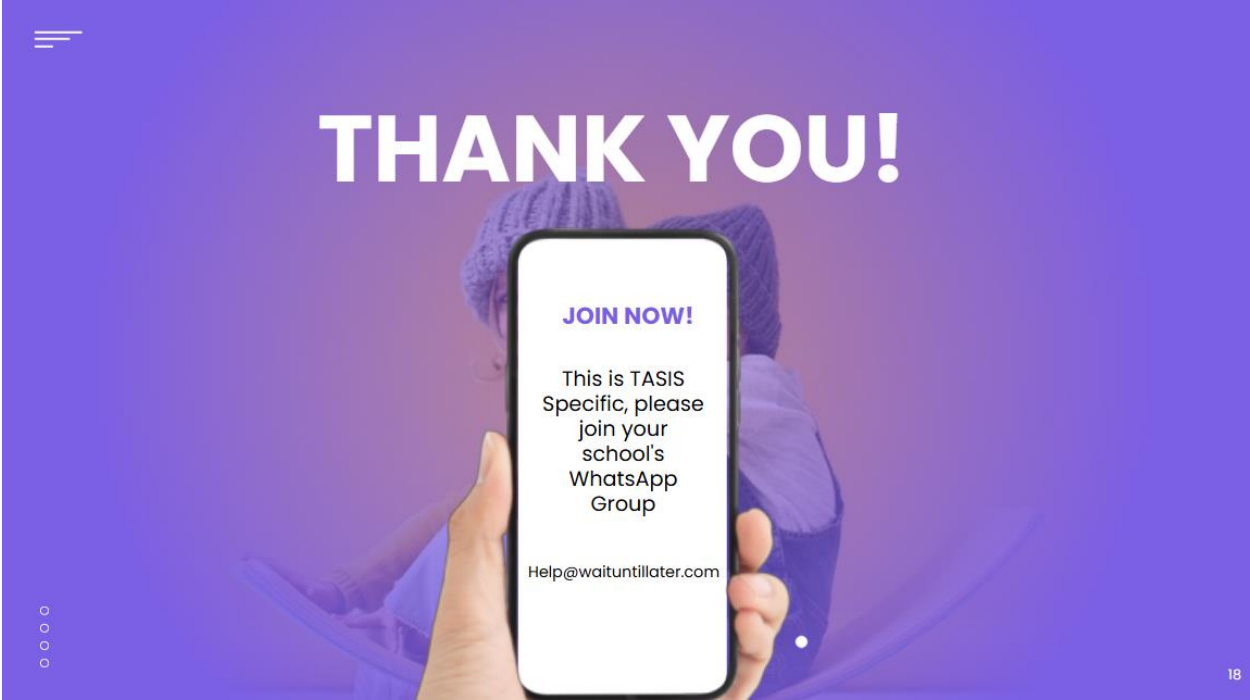
Implementing Digital Boundaries

To ensure safe technology use, parents can implement strategies such as using "The Brick" (a non-smartphone emergency device), VPN blockers to restrict inappropriate content, and tech safety workshops to educate themselves on best practices. Yondr pouches can be used in schools or social settings to physically limit smartphone use, helping children stay present and engaged in real-world interactions.

Next Steps

A collective effort is required from parents, educators, and mental health professionals to create a cultural shift in how children interact with technology. By delaying smartphone access, children can develop stronger cognitive skills, healthier relationships, and a more balanced approach to digital consumption. This movement seeks to establish new norms that prioritize child development over digital dependency, ensuring that young individuals are set up for success in all aspects of life.

For more information or to join the movement, contact help@waituntillater.com.



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