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

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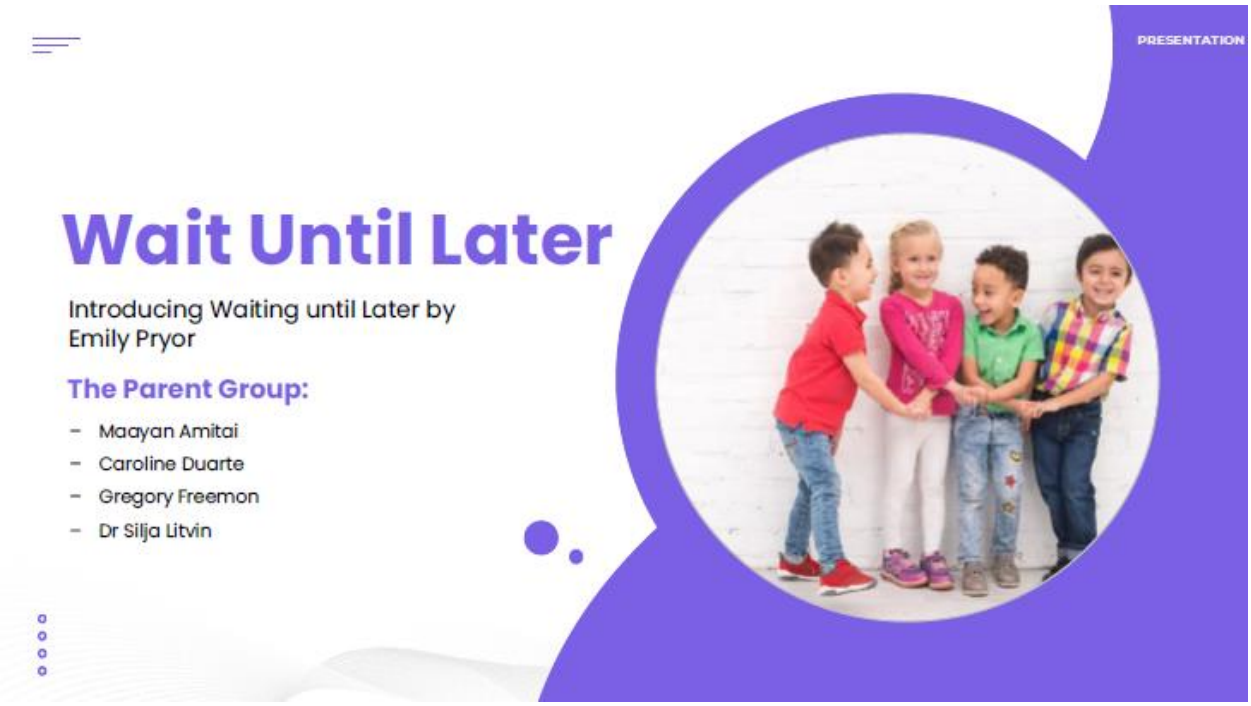


Introduction

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.

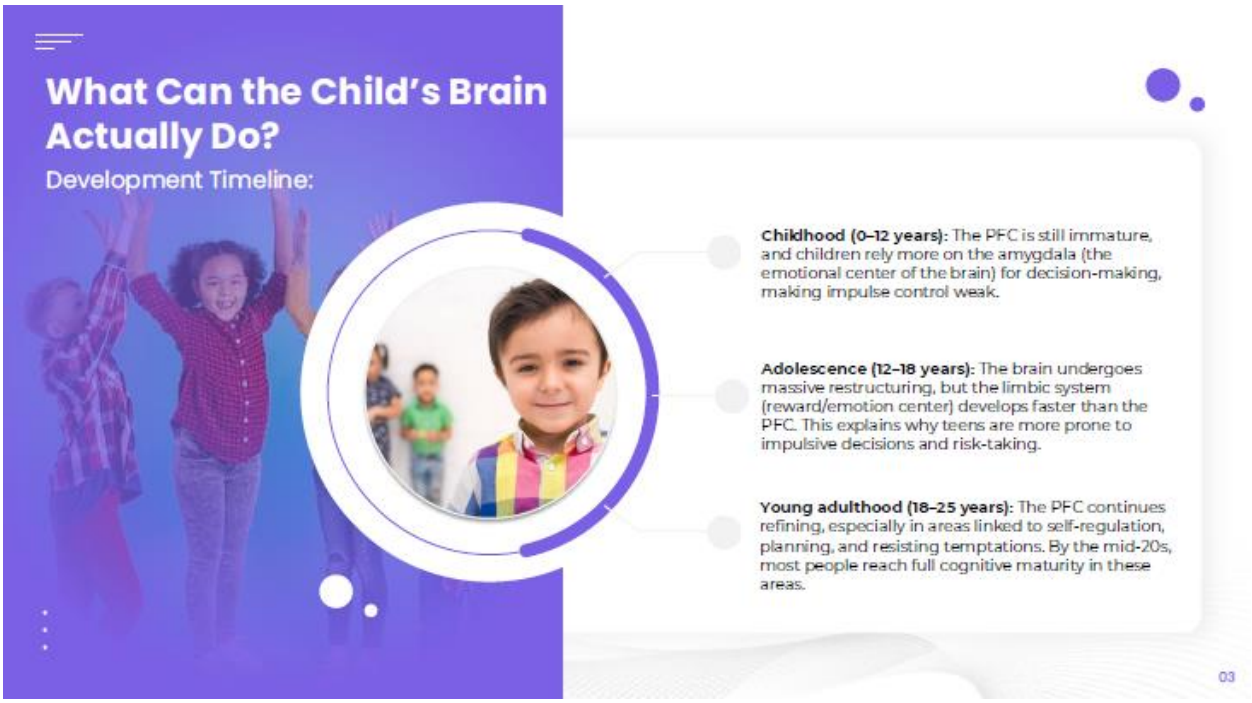
This data consistently shows a strong link between early smartphone exposure and negative outcomes in children. These effects range from diminished attention spans and reduced academic performance to increased risks of mental health issues. Children lack the ability to regulate their digital consumption 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.



The Impact of Smartphones on Performance

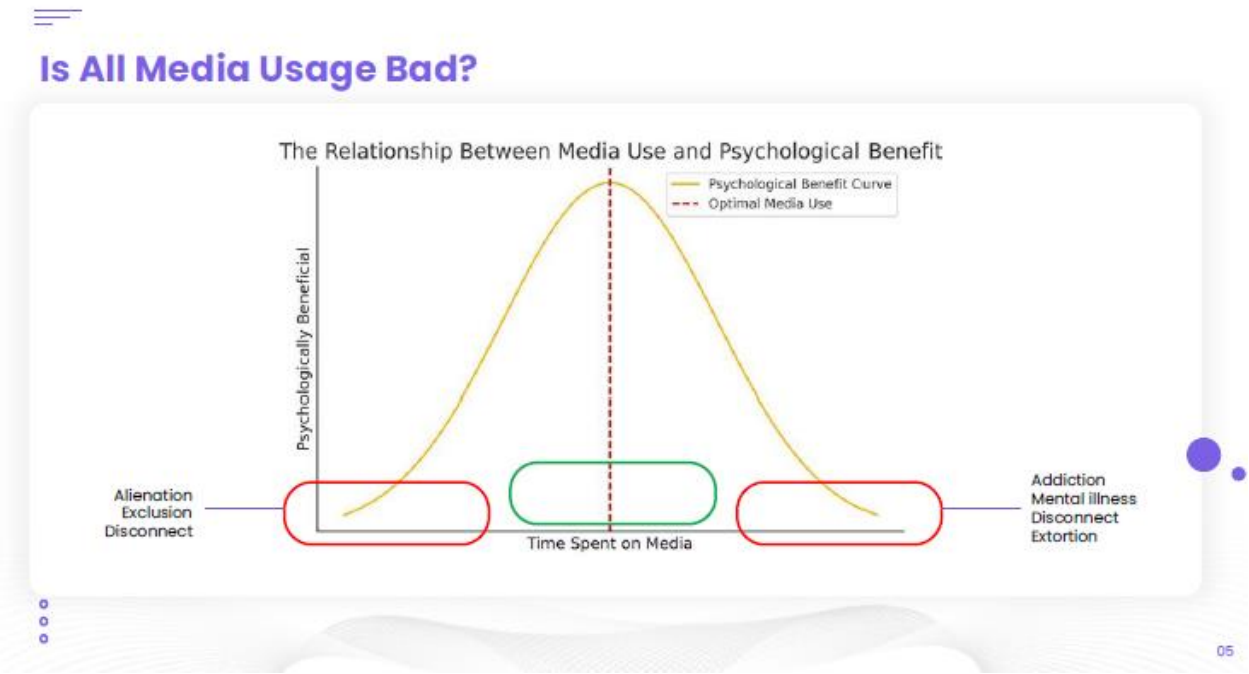
Key Findings from Research

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.

Evaluating Screen Time: Is All Media Bad?

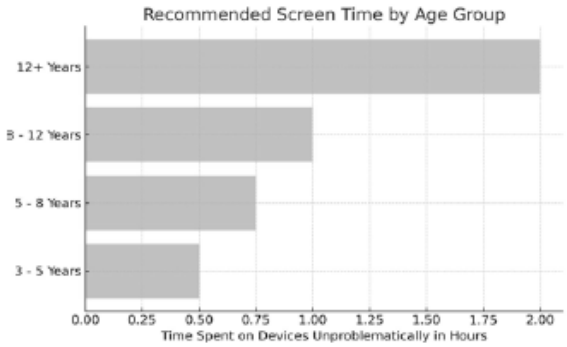
While not all digital engagement is harmful, excessive screen use can lead to social alienation, increased mental health risks, addiction, and emotional disconnection. Children who spend too much time on screens may feel excluded from real-world interactions, struggle with forming meaningful relationships, 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.



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;12:271-283. doi: 10.1016/j.pmedr.2018.10.003. PMID: 30406005; PMCID: PMC6214874.

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"

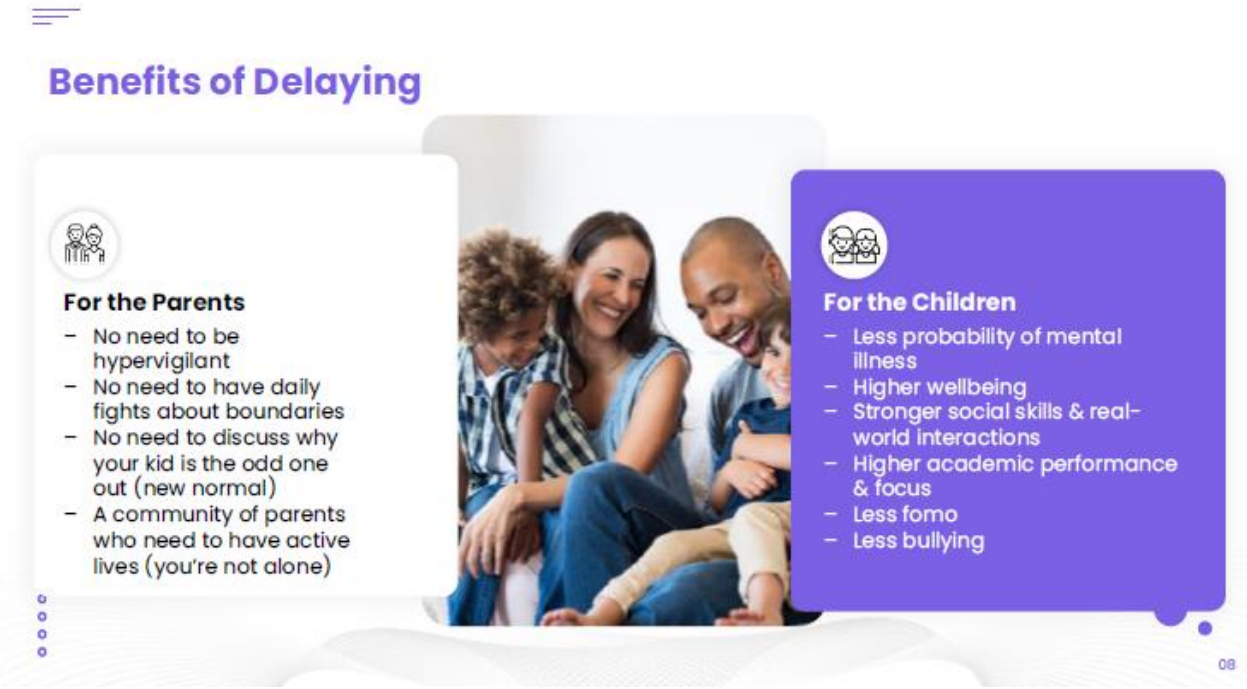
Benefits of Delaying Smartphone Access

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.



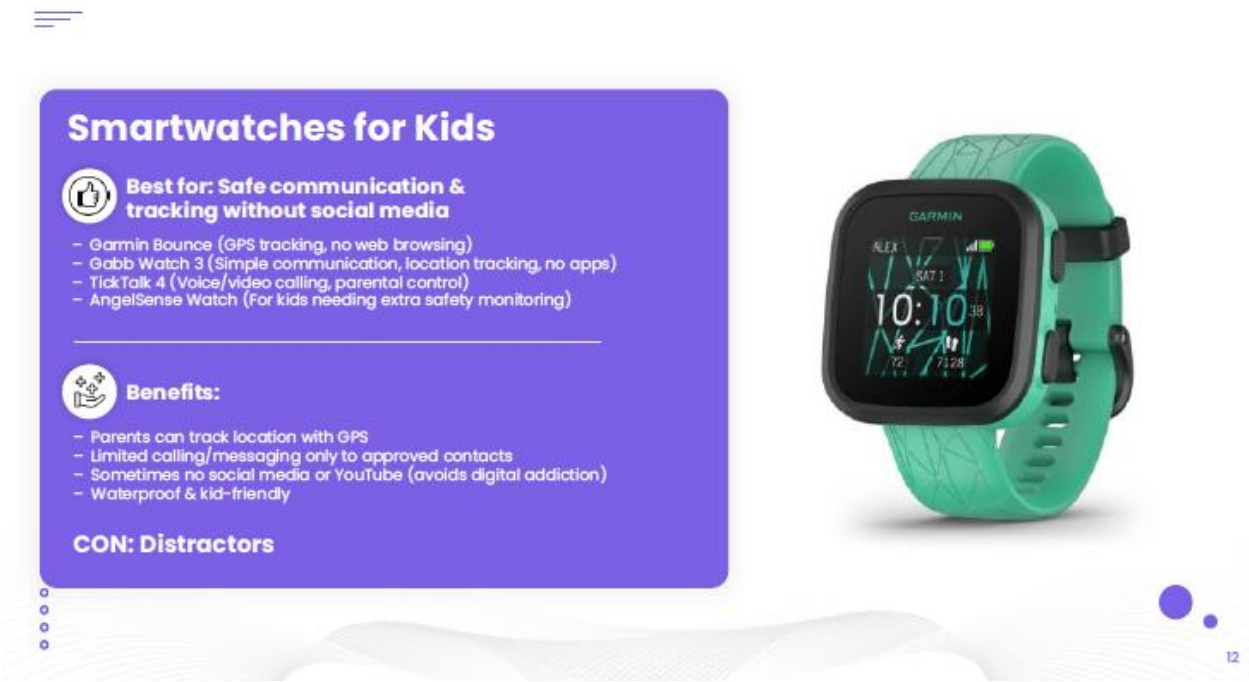
Alternative Communication Tools

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.

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.



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.

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.

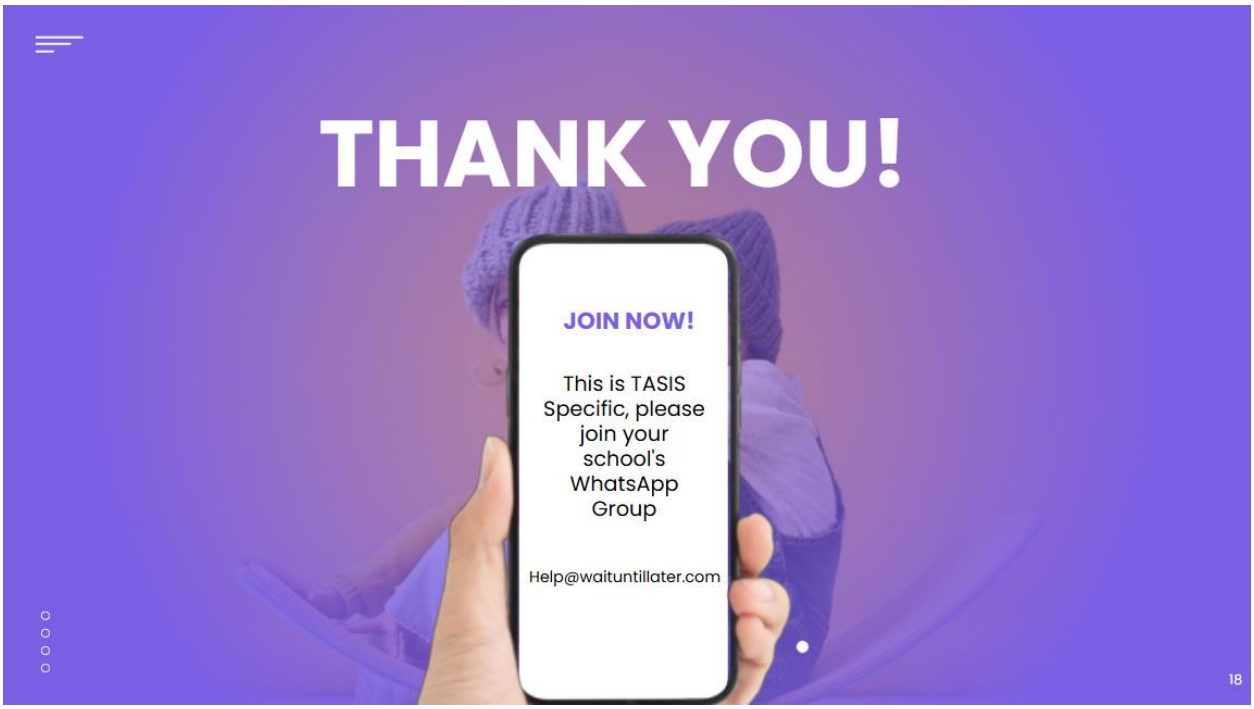
Implementing Digital Boundaries

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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Silja