

FOR NORTH MIDDLESEX FAMILIES

UNFILTERED

the grown-up guide

Phones, social media and keeping kids safe. A straight-talk, no-judgment guide for parents who are trying to get this right.



START HERE

Let's be honest: this is hard.

Phones are everywhere. The apps are built by some of the smartest engineers on earth to be hard to put down. And your kid hears “when are you getting a phone?” every week. **If you've already handed one over, you're not a bad parent. If you're trying to wait, you're not a weird one.** This guide is for both.

57%

of kids ages 11–12 have their own smartphone. So do 29% of kids ages 8–10.

Pew Research Center, 2025

81%

of parents whose kid has a smartphone say staying in touch is a major reason. (There are other ways to do that. See page 4.)

Pew Research Center, 2025

68%

of parents say kids should be at least 12 before they own a smartphone.

Pew Research Center, 2025

What the research says (and doesn't)

- ✓ Teens ages 12–15 who used social media more than 3 hours a day had **double the risk** of depression and anxiety symptoms. *U.S. Surgeon General, 2023*
- ✓ Kids who had a smartphone by age 12 had **higher odds of depression, obesity and poor sleep**. That's a link, not proof of cause. *Pediatrics, 2025*
- ✓ In a one-week study of 203 kids ages 11–17, the typical kid got **237 phone alerts a day**, and 59% used their phones between midnight and 5 a.m. on school nights. *Common Sense Media, 2023*
- ✓ The kids who grew up with it are telling us something: **47% of young adults wish TikTok had never been invented**. Only 21% say that about smartphones. *Harris Poll with Jonathan Haidt, 2024*
- ✓ Scientists still debate how much social media *causes* problems. A 2023 National Academies review found real risks, like unhealthy comparison, but not proof of harm to every kid. *National Academies, 2023*

So why wait?

Because waiting is the low-risk bet. A smartphone can always come later. A childhood can't be done over.

Timing, not prohibition.

🔒 INFOSEC REALITY CHECK

A smartphone is also a **camera**, a **microphone**, a **GPS tracker** and a front door that strangers can knock on 24/7. That's a lot of security to hand a 10-year-old.



This initiative isn't about judging parents or telling anyone what they should do. These can be hard choices.

N.M. Unplugged (nmunplugged.com)

STRENGTH IN NUMBERS

Waiting is easier together.



One family waiting alone can feel like swimming upstream. When a whole grade waits, nobody's kid is the only one without a phone, and “but everyone else has one” stops being true.



Many parents agree—but feel stuck. No one wants their child to be one of the few without a phone or social media. They don't want their kid to feel like an outcast.

Tyler Lapierre, founder of N.M. Unplugged, Townsend middle school teacher and father of three (from nmunplugged.com)

You're far from alone

- ✓ **More than 155,000 parents** have signed the Wait Until 8th pledge to hold off on smartphones until at least the end of 8th grade. *Wait Until 8th*
- ✓ **More than 190,000 families** in the UK have signed a pact: no smartphone before 14, no social media before 16. *Smartphone Free Childhood*
- ✓ **At least 39 states and DC** now require schools to ban or limit student phones. *Education Week, 2026*
- ✓ The bestseller *The Anxious Generation* (Jonathan Haidt, 2024) proposes four norms: **no smartphones before high school**, no social media before 16, phone-free schools, and more real-world independence and play.

WANT COMPANY?

N.M. Unplugged is “a community of North Middlesex families committed to delaying smartphones and social media until at least high school for the betterment of our kids!”

Learn more and take the pledge: nmunplugged.com



THE #1 REASON KIDS GET PHONES

Staying in touch, without the whole internet.

Most parents hand over a phone so they can reach their kid (see page 2). Fair. But you can solve *that* problem without handing over an app store, a browser and every group chat in the grade.

Kid phones

Examples: Gabb, Pinwheel, Bark Phone (basic plan). Calls, texts and GPS. **No web browser, no open app store, no social media.** Some let you approve extra apps later, so check the plan.

Kid smartwatches

Examples: Gabb Watch, or a cellular Apple Watch set up with “Apple Watch For Your Kids.” Calls, messages and location from the wrist.

Flip phones: read the fine print

Great for calls and texts, but “**flip**” **doesn't mean internet-free**. Some, like the Nokia 2780 Flip, have a web browser and email.



Home alone after school?

That's the most common real need. A kid phone or watch covers the “I'm home” call, the “practice ended early” text, and emergencies. That's the whole job.

🔒 INFOSEC TIP: TEST BEFORE YOU TRUST

Before you hand it over, try to **open a browser, install an app and join a group chat** on it yourself. If you can, so can they.

Totally fine in the meantime

A family computer in a shared room

The school Chromebook

Video calls with Grandma

Movie night

Games, with the guardrails on page 5

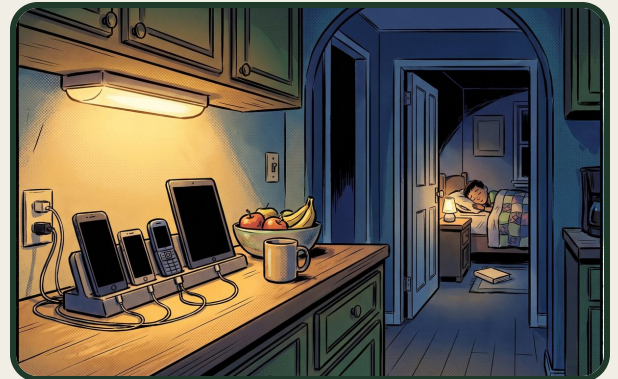
A landline or shared family tablet

Brand names are examples, not endorsements. Features and plans change, so check the current details before you buy.

FROM A LOCAL INFOSEC PRO

Lock it down: the home checklist.

No smartphone doesn't mean offline. Tablets, game consoles, school Chromebooks and smart TVs all connect to the internet, and **most of them have chat**. This is the same thinking companies use to protect their networks, scaled down to your kitchen. Pick two this week. You don't need all eight tonight.



1 DEVICES SLEEP OUTSIDE BEDROOMS

Charge everything in the kitchen overnight, yours included. Pediatricians advise keeping devices out of bedrooms and screens off for the hour before bed. *AAP, 2026*

2 TURN ON THE BUILT-IN CONTROLS

Screen Time (iPhone, iPad, Mac), Google Family Link (Android, Chromebook), Microsoft Family Safety (Windows, Xbox), and the Nintendo, PlayStation and Xbox family settings.

3 YOU APPROVE NEW APPS

Turn on "Ask to Buy" (Apple) or app approvals in Family Link. Every new app becomes a quick conversation instead of a surprise.

4 LOCK DOWN GAME CHAT

Roblox, Fortnite, Minecraft and the consoles all have chat. Set it to **friends only** or off. Strangers use game chat to find kids.

5 FILTER YOUR HOME WI-FI

Point your router at a free family-safe DNS filter (e.g., OpenDNS FamilyShield or CleanBrowsing Family). It covers every device in the house, even the ones you forgot about.

6 YOU HOLD THE KEYS

Until high school, you know every password. Use long passphrases (four random words) and a password manager. Turn on **2-step login for your own email and Apple/Google account**: that's where every password reset goes.

7 LOCATION: FAMILY ONLY

Share location with family, never friends-of-friends. Turn off location tags in the camera app, and post photos after you leave, not live.

8 HELP FIRST, ALWAYS

The best security control is a kid who tells you when something goes wrong. Promise out loud that you'll help first. The consequences talk can wait.

🔒 INFOSEC TIP: WHEN THE TIME COMES

Set up your kid's first real accounts **together**. Make **your email and phone the recovery options**, turn on 2-step login from day one, and use a family account (Apple Family Sharing or Google Family Link). If an account is ever hijacked, the reset comes to you, not a stranger.

NO JUDGMENT ZONE

Already handed over a phone?

You're in good company: more than half of 11- and 12-year-olds have one. **It's not too late to reset,** and resetting isn't the same as punishing.

Talk first, then change

Explain the *why* before you touch a setting. The comic makes a good opener. Kids take change better when it isn't a punishment.

Social media can wait, even if the phone stays

Pause or delete the social apps and hold off on new accounts until high school. Group texts with real-life friends can stay.

Nights off

The phone charges in the kitchen. This one change protects sleep and cuts off the midnight group chat.

Downgrading is allowed

Swapping a smartphone for a kid phone or watch is a reset, not a failure. Frame it as “for now,” not “forever.”

IF SOMETHING GOES WRONG

Stay calm. Help first. Your reaction decides whether they tell you next time.

Someone threatens to share a photo

This is sextortion. It's a crime, and it's never your kid's fault. **Don't pay.** Keep the evidence (screenshots), block and report the account, then report it to NCMEC's CyberTipline (report.cybertip.org, 1-800-843-5678) or the FBI (tips.fbi.gov). takeitdown.ncmec.org helps remove images taken of a minor; the photo never leaves your device. NCMEC gets about 137 of these reports a day.

Cyberbullying

Screenshot everything, report the posts and accounts in the app, and tell the school. Don't let your kid reply. StopBullying.gov has step-by-step guides.

A stranger is grooming your kid

Flattery, secrecy, gifts, pressure to move to a private app. Save the messages and report to the CyberTipline.

Your kid seems hopeless

Call or text **988**, any time. If anyone is in danger, call 911.

WHAT TO SAY FIRST

“Thank you for telling me. You’re not in trouble. We’ll figure this out together.”

READ IT TOGETHER

Talk, don't just block.

Controls catch a lot. Conversations catch the rest. **UNFILTERED**, the companion comic, gives you an easy way in: one chapter at a time, then one question. There's no quiz. The conversation is the point.



CHAPTER	WHAT IT COVERS	THEN ASK
CH. 01 The Hook	How apps are designed to keep you scrolling	“Which app or game is hardest to put down? Why do you think that is?”
CH. 02 Highlight Reel	Filters, fake lives and the comparison trap	“Has a post ever made you feel worse about yourself?”
CH. 03 The Comment Section	Cyberbullying, and how to be an upstander	“What would you do if a friend got picked on in a group chat?”
CH. 04 Who's Really There?	Catfish, grooming red flags and sextortion, with nothing graphic. <i>Preview this one first.</i>	“If someone online asked you to keep a secret from me, what would you do?”
CH. 05 Lock It Down	Passwords, 2-step login, scams and oversharing	“Who knows any of your passwords right now?”
CH. 06 Log Off	Real life, plus the “I’m In” card you sign together	“What would you do with an extra hour every day?”

What kids gain by waiting

- ✓ Build real-world social skills
- ✓ Develop independence and problem-solving
- ✓ Sleep better and focus better in school
- ✓ Spend more time being active and creative
- ✓ Learn to deal with boredom!

From nmunplugged.com

Fill the time

The fourth norm in *The Anxious Generation* is more real-world independence. Try:

- ✓ Walking or biking to a friend's house
- ✓ A solo errand to the store or library
- ✓ A club, team, instrument or job
- ✓ Unscheduled, unsupervised boredom. It's where hobbies start.

WANT COMPANY?

Wait together.

Join North Middlesex families in Townsend, Ashby and Pepperell who are delaying smartphones and social media until at least high school.

nmunplugged.com

Pass it on: share this guide with three families in your kid's grade. Waiting is easiest when your kid's friends are waiting too.



Keep these handy

Emergency: 911

Anyone in danger right now.

988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline

Call or text 988, or chat at chat.988lifeline.org. Free, 24/7.

Crisis Text Line

Text HOME to 741741.

Take It Down (NCMEC)

takeitdown.ncmec.org. Removes private images of minors.

CyberTipline (NCMEC)

report.cybertip.org • 1-800-843-5678

FBI tips

tips.fbi.gov, for sextortion and online threats.

StopBullying.gov

Spotting, stopping and reporting bullying.

Common Sense Media

commonsensemedia.org. Age ratings for apps, games and shows.

Sources, checked September 2026. Pew Research Center, "How Parents Manage Screen Time for Kids" (2025). U.S. Surgeon General, *Social Media and Youth Mental Health* (2023). *Pediatrics*, smartphone ownership by age 12 (2025). Common Sense Media, *Constant Companion* (2023). Harris Poll with Jonathan Haidt (2024). National Academies, *Social Media and Adolescent Health* (2023). American Academy of Pediatrics policy statement (2026). Wait Until 8th; Smartphone Free Childhood; Education Week phone-ban tracker (2026). Jonathan Haidt, *The Anxious Generation* (2024). NCMEC (2026). Device features from each maker's website. Quotes from nmunplugged.com.

About this guide. Prepared by unhackchildhood.com. Illustrations were made with AI. Brand names are examples, not endorsements. This is general information, not medical or legal advice. Free to print and share.



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Made in North Middlesex for families who are trying to get this right.
Free to print and share.