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How to Talk to Your Kids about Tech Limits and Safety

When it comes to kids and technology, my mantra is, “talk to your kids about responsible use, safety and limits before utilizing a parental control application to restrict or monitor your child’s device.” For some parents, that bit of advice seems about as easy as explaining to the cat why he shouldn’t claw the couch. Here’s my recommendation for how to frame the conversation about screen time, safe surfing, and the use of parental control software.



In a perfect world, your first conversation about how mobile devices are a privilege that come with responsibilities will take place either before or as you’re handing them their first cellphone or tablet. But it’s never too late to start the discussion so that you can return to these themes again and again as part of an ongoing dialog, whenever the opportunity arises.

First, lay out your child’s responsibilities in order to maintain the privilege of having this phone/Kindle/iPad, etc. I’d suggest that these include:

Using their electronics safely. Review not talking to strangers online, not going to places on the Internet that they know you wouldn’t approve of, and not using them at unsafe times – such as when doing an activity that requires their attention (like driving), or when they’ve been left in charge a younger sibling.

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Not allowing gadgets to interfere with their responsibilities. Come to an agreement about appropriate times to use devices. These could include: never at family meal times, not after 8pm, not while doing homework or chores, etc. Discuss how much time each day can be spent doing XX activity. If you determine these appropriate limits together, it will be easier to enforce a rule they agreed to than one that is dictated solely by the parent.

It is a good idea to consider which use restrictions will apply to parents as well (like not using gadgets at dinner) and which apply just to kids. Be prepared to answer why some rules don't apply to Mom & Dad, because that's almost always a question when limits are discussed.

Talk about how use restrictions will be implemented. Will there be a special place that all mobile devices are put during the times when they are not in use? Will they be left on, or put on silent so that texts and alerts aren't distracting?

Protecting their device from damage. What happens if they lose or damage their phone? Will you replace it? Do they have access to an allowance or other funds that would be tapped to fix or replace it? Would they have to get a lower quality device, or live without one for a while? Help them understand now so they can monitor their own behavior.

Protecting their privacy and reputation. Discuss how anything you send to another person electronically, whether it's a text, email, photo or video, could be distributed to people that you didn't intend to see it. Even if they delete their messages (the recipient can forward it, share it, etc.), even if they use an app that says it will delete messages or photos within a certain period of time after they're delivered (the recipient can screen capture, send to another device or use a different phone/camera to capture it).

Before they send a message, photo or video, they should consider how they'd feel if the whole school saw it. What if their friends' parents saw it? Their friend's parents could be using software to monitor their kid's activities. What if you saw it? If they wouldn't want that conversation or image to be seen by others, they shouldn't send it electronically.

Protecting the privacy of others. Never post or share photos or information about others without their permission, particularly if it's personal or embarrassing. You certainly don't want them posting your home address or an inappropriate photo of their little sister.

Finally, discuss what will happen if they don't uphold their responsibilities. Will the device be taken away, and for how long? How can they earn it back? Will you discontinue paying plan fees?

Once everyone has agreed to and understands the expectations for having a mobile device, you can talk about how **you** have certain responsibilities with regards to their mobile use as well. Most notably, ensuring that they use their devices appropriately. Discuss how you will physically examine their device(s) and, if applicable, use monitoring software to confirm they're using their device safely and responsibly.

For older kids with their own source of income, there is the risk that they could hide their activities by purchasing a "burner" phone. However, if you establish early on the parameters of what will be left private, they will hopefully see that you aren't intending to snoop; you just need to ensure their safety.

Will any of their activities be private and off limits of your review? I'd suggest that you pledge not to listen in on voicemails or voice conversations. The rest is up to you.

Including Parental Control Software in the conversation

If you plan to use a parental control application, preview it with your child. Some applications send an alert in the event of certain specific activities, such as creating an additional social media profile, visiting certain restricted websites, or having keywords appear in text or email conversations. If you feel that it's appropriate, you could show your kids what kinds of activities the software will be alerting you to, and assure them that you won't use the monitoring software purely to read through their conversations.

It's best that the use of monitoring software be accompanied by open communication with your teen. Secretly reviewing or watching your child's online activities without their knowledge can adversely affect your relationship and trust, particularly if your child has an inherent expectation of privacy. If they discover that you've been "spying," it could also encourage them to hide their activities in a more sophisticated manner. Instead, have a frank discussion about why you feel it's important to have a presence as well as oversight over their first forays into the digital world, highlighting your need to ensure that they stay safe online. As you see them making responsible choices your trust will grow, and you'll have the opportunity to afford them more freedom in the years to come.

TeenSafe offers a good, multi-platform parental control option that works well in conjunction with open communication. It allows you to remotely monitor web browsing, view texts, calls, social media posts to sites like Instagram & Facebook, as well as see activity posted to apps like WhatsApp or Kik messaging. If you'd like to check out TeenSafe, PTA.org has teamed up with TeenSafe (according to the PTA.org website) to offer a 33% lifetime discount. In addition to the discount, TeenSafe donates \$10 for every paid subscriber to their school's PTA. Head to www.teensafe.com for more information.