



WHAT IS THE **RIGHT AGE**
TO GIVE MY CHILD
A SMARTPHONE?



SELECT

FOREWORD

Giving our child their first smartphone today can be likened to the first time we were allowed to take the public bus on our own. It is a modern-day “rite of passage” that is – for better or worse – occurring at a younger and younger age.

At what age are our children ready to face the digital world along with all its complexities and challenges?

As a parent myself, I too experience the challenges of navigating the digital realm. How then can I guide my children to be media-savvy, secure individuals and responsible citizens – both online and offline?

This guide aims to provide the most vital information and quick helpful tips on smartphone usage, so that the busy everyday parent will be equipped and empowered to deal with the parenting challenges of the digital age while simultaneously reaping its advantages.

Children may be the digital natives of this age, but parents are still the timeless real-life Dad or Mum that they need us to be!

Ms Joanna Koh-Hoe
CEO, Focus on the Family

PREFACE

As a parent, I have asked myself many difficult questions on the practical difficulties of raising a child. The developments of today’s digital age only cause these questions to increase, forcing parents to grapple with unfamiliar concepts and technologies.

We hope to guide parents in answering one of these questions: at what age should I give my child his/her first smartphone?

This is a major parenting milestone in the digital age as a smartphone gives your child access to the Internet. They can watch anything, read everything, and connect with almost everyone online.

Framed in six broad questions that parents should consider and reflect on, this guide will help you arrive at your own answers and raise a digital citizenship that is safe, smart, and kind online.

Mr Lock Wai Han
Chairman, Media Literacy Council

IS MY CHILD READY FOR A SMARTPHONE?

A child's age is not the most important thing to consider when it comes to giving them a smartphone. Instead, judge their level of maturity and responsibility to make sure that they can use their new technology smartly and safely. Some questions to consider are:



DOES MY CHILD OFTEN LOSE THINGS?

If your child often misplaces their homework, backpack, or allowance, they might be too young to take care of a (likely expensive) smartphone, and you might want to wait for them to show more responsibility with their belongings.

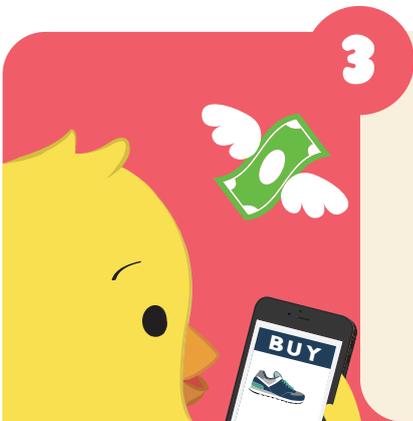
IS MY CHILD ABLE TO STICK TO THE HOUSE RULES I HAVE SET?

If your child can't obey the rules you set in their offline lives on daily matters like homework or bedtime, they might not be prepared to handle more complicated family rules for their smartphone use.



CAN MY CHILD STAND UP TO PEER PRESURE?

Although a smartphone can help a child socialise, be wary if your child wants one just because all their friends have one. It's important that your child is not pressured into making choices, like sexting or cyber-bullying, to 'fit in'. You can also consider contacting the parents of your child's friends to check if they really do have their own phones, and if they have any rules for using them.



IS MY CHILD ATTENTIVE IN CLASS?

A smartphone can be a distraction. Check whether your child keeps up with their schoolwork and pays attention in class. If they don't, a smartphone might be just one more distraction for them to play with.



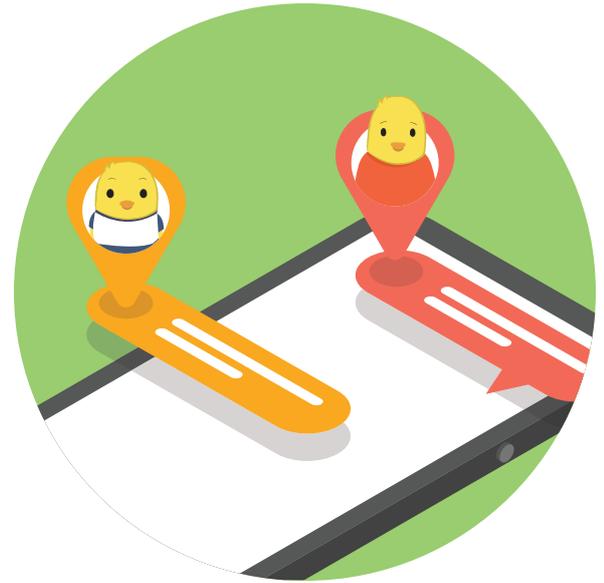
How quickly a child matures can vary hugely among children, even between siblings. If you have more than one child, don't feel pressured to set a certain age to give them their own phones. Instead, let them know that their phone ownership depends on their individual behaviour and actions.

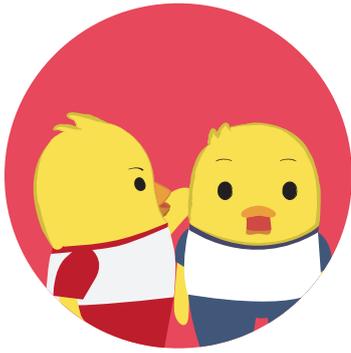
DOES MY CHILD NEED A SMARTPHONE?

A smartphone can be very helpful for your child as it gives them access to a wealth of information online and keeps them contactable. Your child might have to frequently arrange last-minute transport, for example, if project discussions run later than expected. In the case of an emergency, it can save you a lot of worry if they are immediately reachable.

Smartphones are also being increasingly used for homework, CCAs, and other school-related discussions, particularly through WhatsApp. Although primary school-going children occasionally use WhatsApp, the minimum age limit for it is 13.

Your child may try to convince you that they need a smartphone for school. If you are uncomfortable giving them their own phone, you can always let them use your phone for school-related purposes for a set amount of time a day (e.g. half an hour every evening).





On the other hand, there are dangers when giving your child access to the online world, such as cyber-bullying, online predators, and sexting.

A 2014 survey by TOUCH Community Services found that one in four secondary school students admitted to bullying their peers online, while one in three were victims of cyber-bullying. The actions ranged from spreading rumours or to “defacing” a person’s photo and circulating it online. One in five primary school children also reported being cyber-bullied. The consequences of cyber-bullying are as real as bullying in the offline world: children feel lonely, angry, and confused in the short-term, and fear school and perform worse academically in the long-term.

Sexting is another problem that surfaces when young people have smartphones. It gives them the ability to send sexually explicit content of themselves to friends, or even strangers, online. Your child might consider these messages ‘private’, but it is important for them to know that nothing sent online is private. Messages that disappear after being read or after a set amount of time can still be screen-captured. This leaves a digital footprint that they might later regret. Be it accidentally or maliciously, once an explicit photo or message is sent or uploaded, your child loses control over who gets to see it.

As parents, we need to weigh the pros and cons of giving our child a smartphone. Don’t feel backed into a corner – even if you don’t give them a phone, they can always use a payphone at school or ask to borrow a friend’s phone to contact you in an emergency. You could even give them a phone without smartphone capabilities to start with!



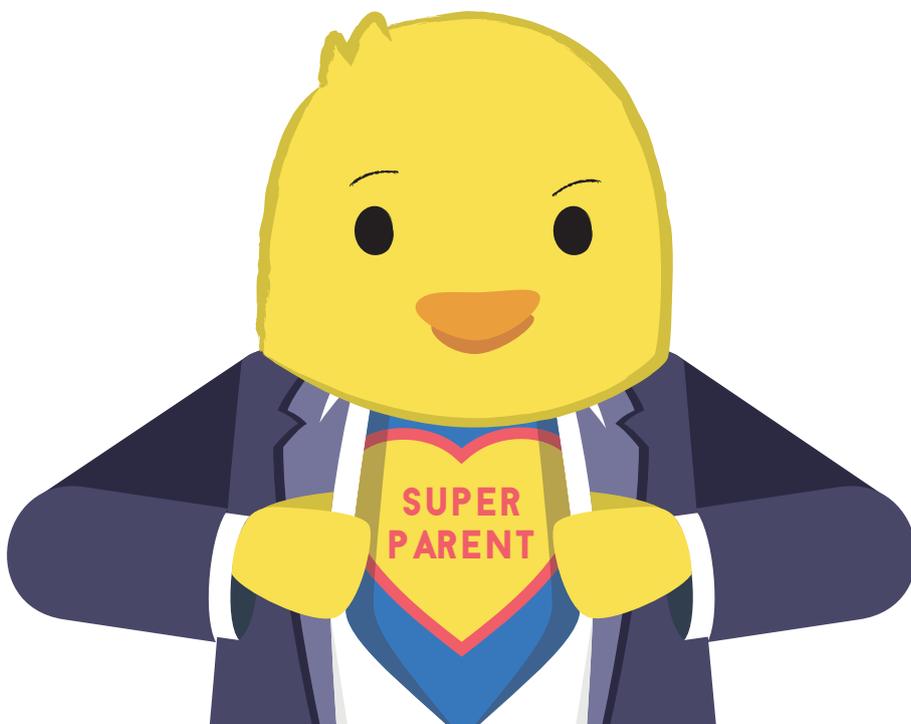
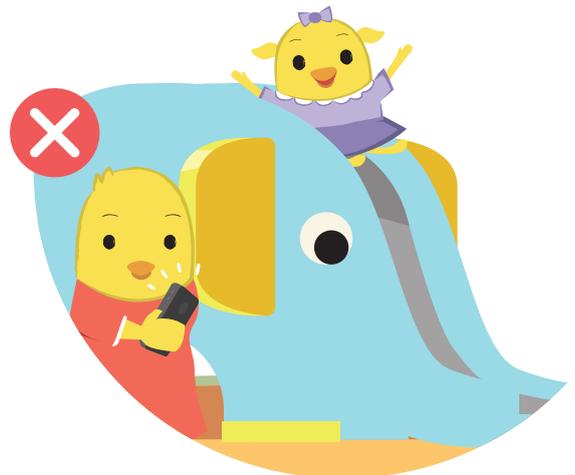
AM I A GOOD ROLE MODEL FOR SMARTPHONE USE?



As the saying goes, “Actions speak louder than words”. Young children learn more from the things they see their parents do than the things their parents say. If it is important to you that your child isn’t glued to their phone, you need to be a role model for balanced screen time. Otherwise, your child might resent the “unfair” rules imposed on them and go behind your back.

Show your child that you are not dependent on your phone, and they will understand that they don’t have to be either! There are many small things you can do every day to set a better example for them. Here’s how you can start:

- 1 Don’t use your phone during specific times of the day, such as meal times or before your child’s bedtime.
- 2 When you are out with your child, avoid using your phone and focus your attention on them.



HAVE I SET UP SOME FAMILY RULES?

As parents, you decide on the values and household rules that your family lives by. The rules for smartphone use are the same – they are entirely subjective and based on each family’s needs. For example, parents may differ on the amount of time they think their child should spend on the smartphone, or the areas designated as no-phone zones.

We recommend that you use a smartphone ‘contract’ with your child as it encourages discussion between parent and child, and the final choice is something the entire family agrees on. This sends a message to your child that you trust them with the smartphone and that the responsibility for continued use of the smartphone is dependent on their obedience to the contract. When you treat your child with respect and hold yourself accountable to the same rules, they are more likely to follow them.

To see what a typical smartphone contract might look like, flip to the back of this handbook.



DO I KNOW HOW TO PROTECT MY CHILD ONLINE?

If you have decided to buy a smartphone for your child, there are a number of things you can do to safeguard your child. Technical measures include parental controls and safety blocking tools that you can set up on your child's smartphone. Android and iPhones have built-in features that allow parents to enable or disable certain functions, including restricting access to adult content. You can also download parental control apps that offer services from filters on content and downloads to location-tracking features, such as Qustodio, Net Nanny, Norton Family Premier, Kaspersky Safe Kids, and FamilyTime.

Websites such as pcmag.com and digitaltrends.com provide useful comparisons of parental control software so you can easily find one that meets your needs and budget. Before giving your child their smartphone, use it with the safety features enabled to ensure that your child's smartphone is protected in ways you are comfortable with.

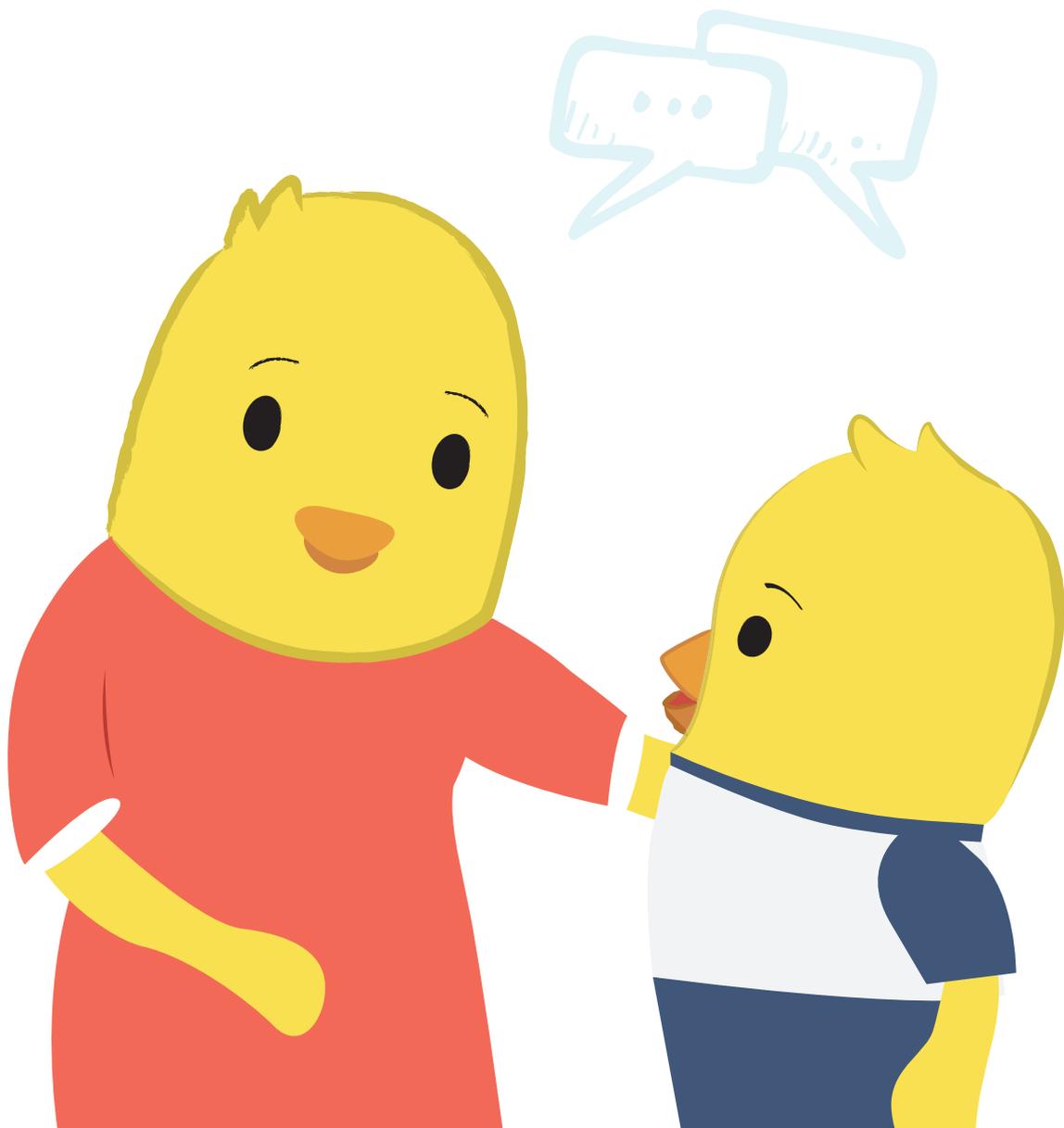
It is important to explain to your child why you are using these protective measures. As they continue using the phone, you can reward their good behaviour and increasing maturity by loosening the restrictions.



HAVE I STARTED AN OPEN CONVERSATION WITH MY CHILD?

It is important to keep the lines of communication open with your child. Even the moment you give them a phone can be a teaching experience. Talk to them and share your own experiences with your phone, such as by showing them some of your favourite apps and explaining why you use them. It might be WhatsApp or Gmail, a game you enjoy playing, an app that keeps track of your fitness, or one that helps you take better photos on your phone. If you have any social media accounts, take the opportunity to show your child the privacy settings you have for each account, and emphasise the importance of keeping information safe online.

Be involved with your child's online activities, especially in their first few months of having a smartphone. Guide them towards thoughtful and effective smartphone use by balancing screen time with meaningful activities that do not involve the use of the smartphone.

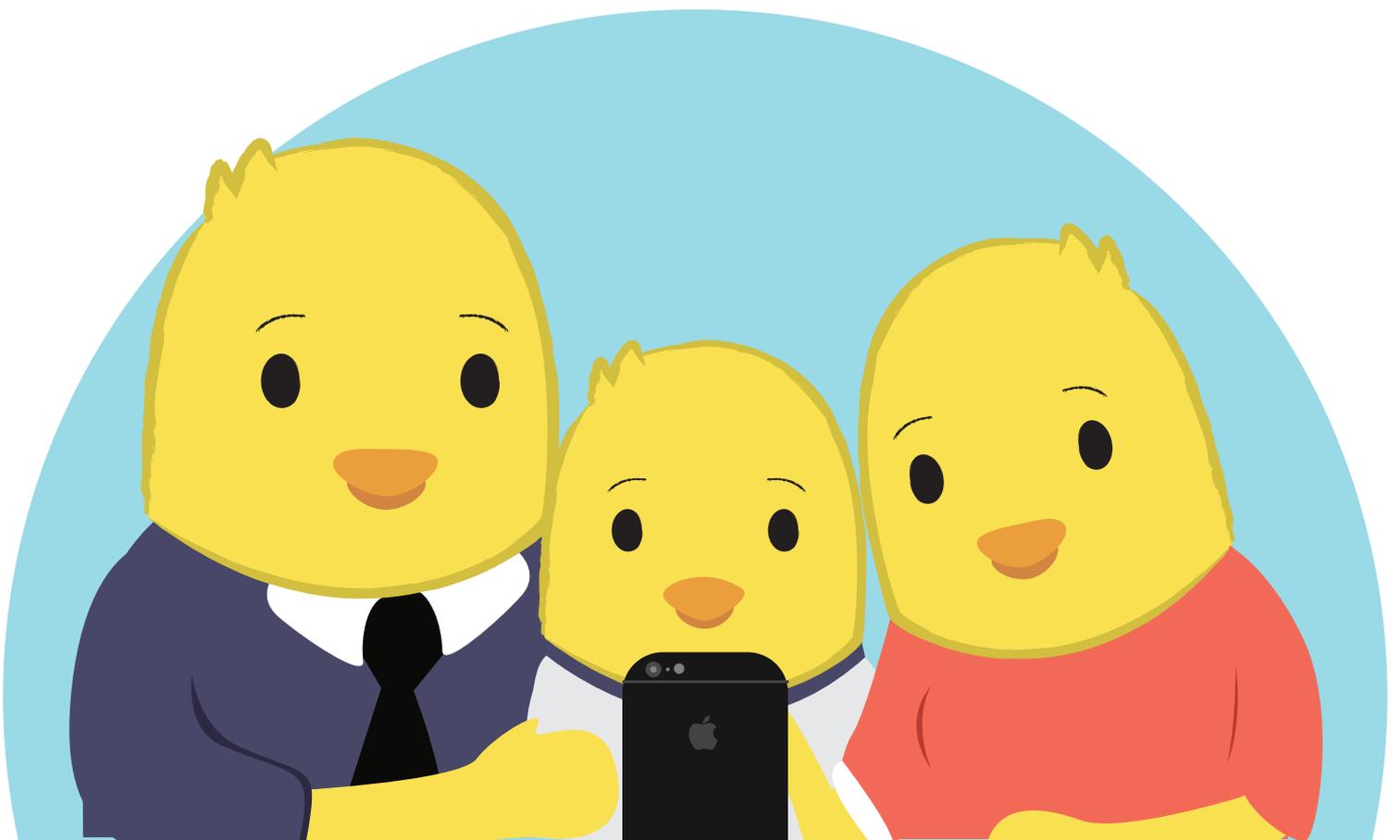


KEEP CALM AND PARENT ON

Ultimately, the best parental control app is you – the parent! So if you have plans to give your child a smartphone in the near future, start the conversation about ground rules early. This ensures that there are no surprises when you eventually buy the device and start enforcing the rules.

Make it clear that you value an honest relationship. If you want truthful answers from your kids, it is important not to over-react when they make a mistake because this will prevent them from owning up to you in the future. This does not mean that you cannot punish them for mistakes, but stay calm and focus on finding solutions first. At the end of the day, let them know they can always come to you with their questions and concerns.

For more information and parent resources on issues like cyber-bullying, cyber safety and security, discernment of fake news, excessive screen time use, and online responsibility, visit the Media Literacy Council's website at medialiteracycouncil.sg or the Better Internet Campaign website at betterinternet.sg.



CONGRATS ON GETTING YOUR FIRST SMARTPHONE!

With great power to access the Internet comes great responsibility. Our family rules for using this phone are:

I, _____ [child], agree to:

- ✓ Take good care of my phone.
- ✓ Use the phone only between the hours of _____ and _____.
- ✓ Use the phone only at _____ [locations].
- ✓ Not to use the phone during _____ [e.g., mealtimes, bedtime].
- ✓ Not to share personal information such as _____ [e.g., full name, home address, passwords, photos] without checking with _____ [parent].
- ✓ Not to view or send inappropriate content [e.g., pornographic, violent, sexual content].
- ✓ Not to meet anyone I have 'met' online without checking with _____ [parent].
- ✓ Not to respond to any messages that are mean, hurtful, or make me uncomfortable, and to tell _____ [parent] about it.
- ✓ Be brave and tell _____ [parent] the truth if I have done something I should not have or if I get into trouble online.
- ✓ If I break any of the rules, I know that _____ [parent] will _____ [e.g., take away phone for a week, reduce the amount of time I can use the phone].

We, as a family, agree to:

- ✓ Not write or say anything on our phones that we would not say in person.
- ✓ Speak up if we see someone being cyber-bullied.
- ✓ Verify the information we receive online by checking different sources.
- ✓ Be honest and own up if we break the rules of the contract.



Child's signature



Parent's signature(s)



Date

ABOUT MEDIA LITERACY COUNCIL

The Media Literacy Council works in partnership with industry, community and government to champion and develop public education and awareness programmes relating to media literacy and cyber wellness. In an increasingly interactive and participatory media landscape, the Media Literacy Council seeks to cultivate and encourage the public to become discerning media consumers with the ability to evaluate media content effectively, and use, create and share content safely and responsibly. It also advises the government on how to respond to emerging issues relating to internet and media content.

Find out more at www.medialiteracycouncil.sg.

ABOUT FOCUS ON THE FAMILY

A local charity with Institution of a Public Character (IPC) status, Focus on the Family Singapore Limited is dedicated to *helping families thriveSM* by being a voice for Family. We partner individuals and organisations to nurture family bonds through transformational family life education, trusted resources, content placements and counselling. Family programmes include a new parent-child workshop *SCREENed* to kindle honest conversations around screen time, equipping parents to manage their children's digital device usage.

Find out more at www.family.org.sg.

