

Where's the Niceness Emoji?

First steps. First day of school. First phone? Getting their own cell is fast becoming a new developmental milestone, and it's happening earlier all the time. Being a good digital citizen starts now.

by JENNIFER KING LINDLEY



ALLISON LANE'S 10-year-old daughter pleads for an iPhone on a daily basis. The struggle has left the Stoneham, Massachusetts, mom torn. "We're moving to a new town and, like it or not, this is how kids communicate now. I want her to feel included,"

Lane says. But Lane fears what awaits her daughter on the ugly side of the digital world. "My mom friends have told me that kids who feel slighted somehow often just block the person."

There is a lot for parents like her to be anxious about,

from the bone fide meanness of cyberbullying (repeated and intentional digital cruelty) to subtle text slights that can tear kids apart, often without parents knowing.

We work hard to raise kind children—kids who sit on the buddy bench, make a card for

someone who needs cheering up, set up a charity lemonade stand. What if a smartphone turns them into a different person? Anxious. Sad. Even unkind. (Not to mention zombified.) Being able to communicate instantly and constantly with less adult supervision allows a kid's still-forming psyche to run wild and largely unchecked in a totally unchecked arena. Third- and fourth-graders who have their own phones are significantly more likely to report being cyberbullied, according to research from Bridgewater State University in Massachusetts. The study shows that the youngest phone owners are more likely to admit cyberbullying other kids too. Hurt feelings are also common, as Lane heard through the rumor mill.

"Kids ages 7 to 10 are still learning the skill of taking other people's perspective and beginning to understand empathy," says Ann-Louise Lockhart, Psy.D., founder of A New Day Pediatric Psychology, in San Antonio. "If they send a text and don't get a quick response, they jump right to 'my friend must hate me.' They're not yet good at considering the possibilities: The friend may have turned their phone off to do homework or eat dinner."

But there are many things you can do to help prepare

your children for the emotional and social challenges having a phone can bring, even long before you give them the coveted device. “Parents still have a lot of influence over kids at this age, and you can be a digital mentor,” says Deborah Heitner, Ph.D., author of *Screenwise: Helping Kids Thrive (And Survive) in Their Digital World*. That can mean encouraging their natural kindness too. Laura Tierney, founder of The Social Institute in Durham, North Carolina, often gives presentations in schools to kindergartners on up. “One student coined a term I love: ‘cyber backing’—the opposite of cyberbullying,” Tierney says. “It means having each other’s backs online: speaking up for someone, sending a supportive text to a friend.”

When a Phone Is Still a Long Way Off

● **Set the bar.** Uncomfortable as it may be to contemplate, your relationship with your phone is sending powerful messages. “Kids complain that their parents have their heads down in their devices. They crave your attention,” Dr. Heitner says. It gives the wrong impression that ignoring people is okay.

● **Coach them.** You can work on your kids’ digital social skills when their tablets and computers are still in your living room. “Observe how they act in Google Classroom, for instance. Are they emailing the teacher multiple times if she doesn’t respond instantly? If so, talk to your child about being patient in waiting for others to reply,” Dr. Heitner suggests. If they wander off during a Zoom with Grandma, explain how to wind down a



ICYMI

No surprise, texting, DMing, and FaceTiming are major ways for even young kids to socialize now. Some notable phone numbers:

- 31%** of parents say their child began interacting with a smartphone before age 2
- 20%** of 8-year-olds have a smartphone
- 53%** of all 11-year-olds have a smartphone
- 67%** of fifth- and sixth-graders text at least once a week

Sources: Common Sense Education, The Social Institute, Pew Research Center.

convo. Praise their courtesy too: “It was great to include your friend in that online game so he didn’t feel left out.”

● **Don’t dismiss their digital lives.** Your best shot at establishing yourself as someone your child can always bring digital concerns to is to show enthusiasm for the fun they do have online. This teaches kids you’re not going to overreact if they come to you upset about an online blowup with a friend or an unkind thing they themselves did, Tierney says.

Closer to the Handoff

● Wait until they’re ready.

Kelly Mendoza, vice president of education programs at Common Sense Education, says there’s no perfect age to give kids a first phone. Instead, consider whether your child is mature enough to handle this leap: Do they follow your screen-time limits? Do they have good IRL social skills? Do they blow up in frustration at their online buddies? Dr. Lockhart says there are sound reasons for parents to hold off as long as possible. “Having a phone can make younger kids fast-forward through the stages of social development. Up until age 11 or 12, the relationships that kids are supposed to value most are the ones they have with their parents. When they get a phone, peers and their status among friends become most important. It creates pressure and exposes them earlier to rejection,” Dr. Lockhart says.

● **Get it in writing.** Make a contract that spells out your expectations. (You can download a sample from The Social Institute’s website.) Besides setting screen-time limits, the contract should cover how values, like respect and kindness, show up online. “Tell them that every time we text or upload a video on YouTube, it is a reflection of our character,” Tierney says.

● Remind kids there’s a person behind the screen.

“Tweens come to my office in tears over mean-spirited texts and posts,” says Katie Hurley, a licensed clinical social worker in Los Angeles and the author of *No More Mean Girls*. “Kids don’t always think how their

comments might affect the person on the other end. There can be a lack of empathy and compassion. That’s because they are not seeing the other person’s face, and watching their reaction.” To protect others’ feelings, Hurley suggests kids type potentially sensitive messages (such as refusing an invitation) into a note app on their phone before sending. “Having them read it out loud can give them a new perspective on how they come across,” she says.

● Role-play likely scenarios.

Act out these issues together: What would you do if you are in a group text and someone says something mean to another person? What would you do if you’re hanging out with a friend and she ignores you in favor of her phone? “Kids are great at coming up with solutions,” Hurley says. That might mean speaking up in the group chat—“Hey, Joey’s cool!”—or suggesting to a friend who’s feeling left out that they go on a bike ride.

● Address the tough stuff.

Sad but true: Kids can be mean, online and off. “Your child will likely experience painful situations such as being excluded from a party,” Dr. Lockhart says. “When this happens, parents tend to go into problem-solving mode or try to cheer them up: ‘That doesn’t sound like fun anyway!’” Instead, she suggests helping them process their emotions: “Rejection hurts. Acknowledge what they are experiencing. ‘It sounds like you are bummed about this.’ Then help them sit with that feeling.” You can also toss out mood-boosting ideas, like hanging with a true bestie, or taking a social media break. ☒