



## Screen test

As kids head back to class, plenty of their peers will be wielding smartphones and bragging about new Facebook accounts. Should your child join in? One dad shares how he made the call.

BY DAN O'HALLORAN

**T**his summer, my 9-year-old son asked for a cell phone. His 7-year-old sister begged for a Facebook account (even though Facebook says she's 6 years too young). "When you're ready," I told them. The only hitch? Today's kids think they were *born* ready. And once school starts again, forget it: With many of their friends returning from vacation holding shiny smartphones and laughing over the latest viral videos, the pressure to let them participate only increases. How much freedom to grant, and how soon?

For help, I turned to Jennifer Stinson, a clinical psychologist in Pasadena, California. It turns out the fuzzy answer I gave my kids sort of hit the mark. "There's no magic age when children are ready for interactive technology," she says. "Their maturity level is what matters, and that can vary in any age group."

By the time kids reach middle school, most have spent some time on the Web researching school projects. As their curiosity grows, however, they're bound to stumble on sites geared for peer-to-peer interaction. That's the time to discuss key safety rules, Stinson says. Teach your child to limit direct communication to people he knows in real life. Tell him to come to you—not respond on his own—if he receives an inappropriate message. And make sure he knows never to share any identifying information on a website without your express permission. If your child seems able to follow these guidelines, then he likely can handle broader digital access.

Facebook is supposedly off-limits to children under 13, but plenty of parents help kids skirt the age verification process. Unless you have time to monitor all networking activities of a younger child, Stinson advises waiting until she has a better understanding of privacy protection before letting her sign up.

A mobile phone raises material concerns—does your kid tend to lose things?—as well as considerations of self-control. If you can't imagine your child sitting through class without tapping the buttons, a phone might be more trouble than it's worth. Most kids aren't ready for one until age 12 or so, Stinson says.

If you decide to give your child a phone, make it clear that Internet safety rules from home apply on the go: calls and texts only with people he knows, and no inappropriate exchanges. Because a phone can intrude all too easily on sleep and other activities, designate times when the device must be out of sight—say, after 9 p.m.

With these insights in mind, my wife and I handed down our decisions: My son will have to wait until middle school to get a phone. For Facebook access, my daughter must follow the rules and wait until she's 13. The kids took the news surprisingly well, noting that even if they can't enjoy these privileges right away, it's good to know when they will. Apparently, an important part of building digital smarts is setting limits. ■

*Dan O'Halloran is the editor in chief of Tecca, a website that helps nontechie consumers navigate the digital world.*

### Quick bytes

Some critics say technology creates unhealthy distractions that interfere with learning. Here's a look at the facts.

**94%**  
of 12- to 17-year-olds regularly use the Internet to research school assignments, making that the most common online activity.

**69%**  
of kids in this age group say their fellow students are mostly kind to each other on social networking sites.

**60%**  
of teens who take cell phones to school say they leave the devices off all or most of the time, and 57 percent rarely (if ever) look at text messages in class.

**Keep them safe**  
Go to [BHG.com/SafeWeb](http://BHG.com/SafeWeb) for a guide to protecting kids online.