

Should Toddlers Be Given Access to Cellphones?

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Introduction

According to data collected by Consumer Affairs, which is the title of a scientific journal that studies consumer patterns, 98% of Americans own cell phones (Bazen & Schmitt, 2025). The rise in cell phone ownership also impacts child development, as children are being exposed to advanced technology such as cellphones at a younger age due to their prevalence in American society. According to a study published in the scientific journal Pediatrics, 44% of children under one year old use cellphones at least once a day, and by the time they reach the end of two years of age, 77% of children have used cell phones daily. According to this study, parents mainly gave their kids cell phones as mechanisms of distractions; 70% of parents in the study let their kids use a phone so they could focus on other chores without disruptions, 65% of them used cell phones to avoid temper tantrums in public, 58% of them used it to distract their kids while they left to run errands, and 29% of them used it to help their child fall asleep (McCarthy, 2015). In recent years, psychologists such as Johanthan Haidt have criticized introducing kids to cell phones, as he argues that introducing young children to this technology can contribute to issues for kids later in life such as social anxiety, as children who spend extensive periods online are not likely to engage in social interaction (Morell, 2024). This paper aims to analyze how and why the use of cellphones impacts toddlers' psyche, and what parents can do to try and avoid cell phone addiction in young children.

The Positive Impacts Cellphone Use May Have for Parenting and Education

As a previously cited poll suggests, a majority of parents who give their young children cellphones are usually giving them cellphones to make room for other tasks and to avoid having to navigate a temper tantrum while in public (McCarthy, 2015). This shows that cell phone use

among infants and toddlers can be beneficial, as it can allow for parents to maintain cleanliness of their house (as temporarily distracting their child can give them more time to attend to household tasks, such as cleaning), which can improve an infant's health. It also shows that it can make parenting less exhausting for parents, as it can help them avoid having to deal with intense emotional outbursts in public, which can bring significant comfort to a parent. Moreover, young toddlers can benefit from educational tools on cell phones. Evidently, cellphones can positively impact a parent's mental health and ability to maintain a clean household, while also helping to enhance a child's education.

The Impact of Cellphone Use on Children's Play

Cellphone use has irrevocably shifted the way that children entertain themselves, and this shift can have significant impacts on a child's psyche. Before the digital age, children often played with physical items such as toys, as they didn't have digital technology available to them. Moreover, children also interacted with each other in person, as there weren't tools such as digital messaging to interact. This meant that it was easier for children to reach a stage of play called cooperative play, which is characterized by playing with other people, often with a common objective in mind (Legg, 2020). Engaging in cooperative play is a critical part of child development, and digital technology can hinder cooperative play as it can discourage face to face interaction. Moreover, recent advancements in AI technology, particularly Large Language Models, which mirror human language, means that children can interact with algorithms that resemble humans without ever having to meet another human being (Mearian, 2023). While advancements in LLM could help young children improve their social skills, it's unclear whether or not people elicit the same positive psychological responses when interacting with a Large Language Model compared to a human. Clearly, the emergence of cellphones and AI means that

children logically won't be engaging in cooperative play as often as children in the pre-digital world, which could have some significant ramifications for their development.

The Impact of Cellphones on Child Development

Exposure to cell phones at a young age is correlated with the development of social anxiety. According to research conducted by UC Davis, social media can indeed “trigger anxiety. (UC Davis, 2024).” The anxiety that social media triggers is usually social media anxiety, as social media often makes users compare themselves to curated versions of other people online, resulting in a lingering feeling of inadequacy (UC Davis, 2024). Some might argue that cellphone usage in toddlers won't cause social anxiety in real life because they aren't on social media, however several data trends suggest that young children are on social media platforms. An estimated 4.9 billion internet users are on social media, and this number is expected to jump to 5.85 billion by 2027 (Wong, 2023). The large amount of social media users means that it's likely that infants are using social media platforms on their parents phones. Moreover, 40% of children between the ages of 8-12 have admitted to having social media accounts, as it's quite easy for children to use social media platforms despite age suggestions advising against this (Wong, 2023). While there have been no studies studying toddlers' habits on social media, there have been studies on groups of other young children and the world population that show that a majority of the population has social media, suggesting that toddlers are likely using social media, showing that cell phone use in toddlers may cause the development of social anxiety in their teenage years.

Moreover, social media may cause children to develop attention deficits and social withdrawal. According to a psychologist from UCI, it takes longer for children to focus on a task again after they've been distracted, and she's extremely concerned that young people are

spending so much time on screens, as it makes them more susceptible to distractions, which could limit someone's average attention span as they develop (American Psychological Association, 2023). Moreover, social media's addictive nature may also cause people to develop addiction to this program, which could contribute to social withdrawal. Around 44% of Americans report being addicted to their phones, and Americans, on average, check their phones 205 times a day, demonstrating that people spend extensive time on their phones, which leaves a very limited amount of time for people to interact with each other (Wheelwright, 2025).

How to Parent in the Digital Age

Despite the problematic aspects of cellphone usage, it is possible to parent a child effectively in the digital age of technology to avoid social withdrawal, radicalization, and attention deficits in children. Young children can greatly benefit from educational games that can be downloaded onto cell phones, although young children aren't ready to own cell phones. The general consensus among psychologists is that it's appropriate to give a child a cellphone at around 12-14 years of age (Cleveland Clinic, 2022). Waiting until this age to give children a cellphone is beneficial because children have complex critical thinking skills at this age, which means that they have the ability to question what they see online and set limits for their screen time. Ultimately, digital technology has revolutionized our world, which can have both positive and negative impacts on childhood development, and parents will have to adapt to ensure that their children develop into well-adjusted adults.

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