PARENT ARTICLE

The harder road that pays off

A parent-to-parent article on online access, written agreements, and the ordinary responsibilities that build grit.



THE IDEA TO REMEMBER

Online access works best when it is treated as a privilege connected to responsibility, not an automatic right the whole home must bend around.

So many of us know the pressure of trying to keep the peace by saying yes more often than we should. Screens and internet access are one of the places where this happens most quickly. Once online access starts to feel like something a child is owed, rather than something entrusted to them, the demands can grow louder and a quiet sense of entitlement can begin to take root.

Privilege, not a right

Going online needs to be understood as a privilege, not a child's automatic right. When that difference is clear from the beginning, it gives the whole family something steadier to stand on. Before our own children received phones, we sat down for a clear and unhurried conversation about rights, privileges and responsibility.

We explained that life does not revolve around technology. Technology is meant to serve life. We also spoke honestly about the harms of social media, especially private group chats, where children who are not yet emotionally mature can be pulled into unkind or damaging behaviour. We told them that anything they write online should be something they would be willing for anyone to read at any time, knowing it could stay there permanently. If there was any doubt, the wiser choice was to leave it unsaid.

Clear agreements that protect everyone

We have found it far more effective to put these arrangements into a simple written agreement. It does not need to feel cold or legalistic. At its best, it is just a clear family understanding written down before emotions are high. It lays out the conditions plainly, makes the difference between a right and a privilege unmistakable, and keeps responsibilities and privileges tied together.

When everything is written down, it becomes much harder for anyone to move the goalposts later. As a child shows steady responsibility and cooperation over time, the requirements can ease, and the agreement can become more cooperative. That trust takes time to build, but the certainty it creates is worth the early effort.

In my experience, clear boundaries, spoken and written, remove a lot of the daily negotiation that wears everyone down. The agreement itself becomes a quiet but firm teacher. Freedom is never free-floating. It stays linked to responsibility.

The real cost of too many easy choices

As parents, we want to make life feel safe and manageable for our children. That is good and loving. But we can accidentally do them a disservice when we make everything as easy as possible, or when we offer choices where there should simply be a responsibility to fulfil.

Life will not always offer our children the easiest path. It will not always give them a choice about whether a duty needs doing. If a child is repeatedly given the option to fulfil a responsibility or avoid it, the easier route will often win. Over time, that can quietly train them to step away from commitment instead of learning to stay with it.

I have come to believe that children shielded from every discomfort become less practised at handling the ordinary frustrations of adult life. The muscle of perseverance stays underdeveloped. What feels like kindness in the moment can leave a young person less prepared for the real world they will eventually have to meet.

Building grit through everyday responsibility

In the book, I write about grit, chores, and personal responsibility. These ordinary everyday tasks are where so much of a child's character is quietly built. When a child helps with the running of the home, and learns to finish a job even when it is boring or inconvenient, they begin to understand that effort matters. They learn that their actions have weight, and that they are capable of contributing.

Those same qualities later help them manage screens, friendships, schoolwork, and bigger goals. Character is not usually built in one big conversation. It is built in the small repeated moments, where a child learns to keep going, take responsibility, and do their part.

The longer view

The harder road asks more of us in the moment. It means teaching our children that online access is a privilege, not an automatic right. It means taking the time to put clear agreements in place, and resisting the urge to make every difficult moment easier for them. But that same road gives them something far more valuable: the ability to handle freedom, keep their commitments, and use technology as a tool rather than letting it take over.

As a parent, you already carry real authority, and with that comes real responsibility. When you guide your child with courage and consistency, even when it feels uncomfortable, you are giving them one of the greatest gifts you can offer. The boundaries and clarity you put in place now can shape the kind of future they grow into.

FROM THE BOOK

This article names the harder road. In the book I go further into building grit through everyday responsibility, and I show how to put a family technology agreement in place that can genuinely hold. The goal is not to control your child forever, but to build boundaries that can grow with them as trust and responsibility grow too.