PARENT ARTICLE

# Toddlers and teens: how the same principles change with your child's age

A practical read for parents adjusting the same screen principles across very different ages.



THE IDEA TO REMEMBER

**The principles do not change. What changes is how direct your control is, how much explaining you do, and how gradually you hand those controls over.**

Parents often wonder whether the advice for a three-year-old can possibly be the same as the advice for a fifteen-year-old. On the surface it seems absurd that it could be. A toddler jabbing at a tablet and a teenager locked away with a phone look like two entirely different problems, calling for two entirely different books.

But underneath, they are not two problems. After having given a toddler access, they are the same problem at two different stages, and the principles that guide you through both are the same. What changes is not the compass. It is the terrain.

Think of it as one long arc. At the very start, with a toddler, you hold almost complete control. For those allowing their little ones on devices, you decide what the screen shows, when it appears, and when it goes away, and your child has neither the will nor the means to seriously resist you. At the far end of the arc, with a teenager who will soon be an adult, you hold very little direct control, and any attempt to grab more tends to backfire. The whole journey of these years is the slow, deliberate handing over of the controls, from your hands to theirs, at a pace they should manage. Every principle in good digital parenting, at whatever stage you have allowed and are in, is really about managing that handover well.

Take boundaries, which are vital at every age. With a toddler, a boundary is something you simply set and hold, gently and without much explanation, because a two-year-old does not need the same reasoning and could not follow it anyway. You decide, the boundary is set, and that is enough. Try exactly that approach with a fifteen-year-old, a boundary announced and enforced with no discussion, and you will have a war on your hands, because what a teenager needs is not a rule handed down but a reason they can respect and, increasingly, a say in

shaping. The principle, clear boundaries, holds the whole way along. How you arrive at them inverts completely, from imposed to negotiated, as your child grows.

With the very youngest, though, that same boundary principle simply takes its firmest and most effective form, which is prevention at its strongest, and the science behind it is fairly settled. A toddler should ideally not be encouraged onto screens and phones at all. The part of the brain that governs impulse control is barely built at this age, so a small child has no genuine means of regulating what a screen does to them, and no off switch of their own to reach for. Their eyes are still developing as well, and long stretches of close, fixed focus on a bright screen are increasingly linked to eye strain and to rising short-sightedness in young children. Set against everything a little one truly needs at this stage, real movement, face-to-face talk, sleep and unhurried play, the wisest use of the near-total control you hold is the simplest. Keep the screens largely out of their hands in the first place, rather than managing how many minutes they spend staring into them.

I will be honest that this is a personal conviction as much as a general principle. With my own children I enforced this from the very beginning, keeping tablets and phones out of reach in the early years rather than allowing them in and trying to claw them back later. It asked something of me at the time, yet it spared us an enormous fight further down the road, the battle to remove something a child has already come to depend on. Something I witness so many other parents having to battle with. Because the screens never became the default, I was able to let my children onto them gradually and on my own terms as they grew, with clear boundaries in place from the very first day. Prevention, in my experience, is a far kinder road than any other cure.

That is why, with the very young, your work is prevention. You are establishing habits and a healthy relationship with screens before any dependency has a chance to form, and this is by far the easier work, because nothing yet has to be undone. A toddler who never learns that every dull moment is cured by a tablet does not later need to unlearn it. With teenagers, the work shifts from prevention to collaboration. The habits are already there, the independence is real and rightly growing, and your influence now runs through the relationship rather than through fixed control. You are no longer the gatekeeper in the same way. You are the trusted guide, and the only real authority you have left is the kind your teenager respects knowing you are on their side. This is where the importance of building relationship through communication is realised and cherished.

Seeing the arc this way takes a good deal of pressure off. You are not learning a fresh set of rules every few years as your child changes. You are applying the same handful of principles, clear boundaries, steady consistency, real connection, honest conversation, and adjusting only how firmly you hold the controls and how much explaining you do. The compass points the same way from young to the teenage years. You simply walk it across very different ground.

It also reframes what can feel like failure. A parent who laments that they no longer have the control they had when their child was younger has not lost their grip. They are exactly where the arc is meant to take them. The loosening of control is not the system breaking down. It is the system working, the slow transfer doing precisely what it was always for, which is to produce a young adult who can manage the screen without you standing over them.

So here is the small thing to try, wherever your child sits on that arc. Ask yourself one honest question. Am I parenting the child in front of me, or the child they used to be? The toddler approach clung to too long becomes control a teenager will fight. The teenage approach

reached for too early leaves a young child without the firm edges they still need. Match the grip to the age, and the same steady principles will carry you the whole way.

*Walking the full arc from a younger child to teenager deserves more than a single article can cover. In the book I take each stage in turn, with the specific adjustments that suit a young child, a tween and a teen, so the same principles fit the very different child in front of you at every age.*

**NEXT STEP**

Ask yourself one honest question: am I parenting the child in front of me, or the child they used to be?