

BALANCE BY CHOICE

Before the First Phone

A parent's kit for the weeks before you hand over a first phone. It covers the decisions worth settling before you talk to your kid, the setup that needs your account rather than theirs, what to say when they ask, and what to expect once the phone is actually in the house.

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Sections 1 to 3 happen **before you say anything to your kid**. Sections 4 to 7 are for the handover and the weeks after it.

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One thing worth knowing before you start. Almost every family decides this by age, and age turns out to be very little help. Two eleven year olds can be nowhere near each other on how they would handle a phone. Nothing in this kit asks how old your kid is.

1 Which Device?

BEFORE YOU BUY

The choice that matters is not new against second-hand. It is whether the device has **a browser and an app store**. Everything else is detail.

OPTION	WHAT IT DOES	WHAT IT COMMITS YOU TO	WORTH IT WHEN
Basic phone	Calls and texts. No browser, no apps.	Very little. You can hand it over and stop thinking about it.	The reason is "I need to reach them."
Kids smartwatch	Calls and messages to numbers you approve. Location.	Almost nothing. There is no feed to manage.	Younger kids, or after-school logistics.
Hand-me-down smartphone	The whole internet, same as a new one.	All of it. The price is lower and the job is identical.	You have decided on a smartphone and want to spend less.
New smartphone	The whole internet, plus an expensive object to look after.	All of it, and a replacement cost worth agreeing on first.	They have shown you they can handle it.

The middle two rows are the same decision. A five-year-old handed-down phone opens the same apps as the newest one. If you are choosing it to spend less, that is a good reason. It does not make the phone a smaller step.

A basic phone is not a failure to commit. Plenty of families start there for a year and move up later. That year gives your kid a track record, so when they do ask for a smartphone you are weighing what they have shown you rather than how old they are.

2 Your Seven Non-negotiables

DECIDE FIRST

Answer these before you sit down with your kid. You can still change your mind on some of them once you are talking. Mark the ones that are not up for discussion.

1 • Where does it sleep?

FIRM

OPEN

2 • Who pays if it breaks?

FIRM

OPEN

3 • Do you have the passcode?

FIRM

OPEN

4 • Is location sharing on?

FIRM

OPEN

5 • Do new apps need your OK?

FIRM

OPEN

6 • What time does it go quiet?

FIRM

OPEN

7 • When do we sit down and review this?

Put a real date on it. A rule with no review date turns into an argument later, because the only way to change it is to break it.

Write your answers down before the conversation. Kids are good at negotiating in the moment, and so are you. Deciding in advance is how you avoid agreeing to something at 9pm that you did not mean.

3 The Setup Only You Can Do

YOUR ACCOUNTS

Your kid will set up their own side of the phone. These are the ones that need **your account and your passcode**. Menus move, so if a path has gone, search the setting by name.

IPHONE

- ☐ **Add them to your family**
Settings → Family → Add Member
- ☐ **Turn on Ask to Buy** so downloads need your approval
Settings → Family → your kid → Ask to Buy
- ☐ **Set a Screen Time passcode** they do not know
Settings → Screen Time → Lock Screen Time
Settings
- ☐ **Set age ratings** for apps, music and websites
Screen Time → Content & Privacy Restrictions
- ☐ **Set Downtime** for the hours the phone goes quiet
Screen Time → Downtime
- ☐ **Turn on location sharing**
Settings → your kid → Location Sharing

ANDROID

- ☐ **Install Family Link** and add their Google account
Family Link app → Add child
- ☐ **Require approval** for every new download
Family Link → Controls → Apps
- ☐ **Set a parent access code** they do not know
Family Link → Controls → Parent access code
- ☐ **Set age ratings** in the Play Store
Google Play → Settings → Family → Parental controls
- ☐ **Set daily limits and bedtime**
Family Link → Controls → Daily limit
- ☐ **Turn on location sharing**
Family Link → Location

Do all of this before the phone is in their hands. Setting it up on day one is housekeeping. Adding the same controls three weeks later feels to a kid like something is being taken away, and they will argue about it on those terms.

Also worth doing

- ☐ Set up the phone **together**, in the same room, on the first day
- ☐ Put your own number in it and send the first message
- ☐ Turn on **Find My** or **Find My Device** and check that it works

The five you are most likely to hear, and a reply for each.

"Everyone else has one."

"A lot of them probably do. Tell me what you would use it for that you cannot do now."

WHY

Moves the conversation off the head count and onto their reasons, which are something you can actually talk about.

"Don't you trust me?"

"I trust you. The phone is the part I am careful about. It is built by people whose job is to make it hard to put down."

WHY

Keeps it about the device rather than their character, so there is nothing for them to defend.

"You are ruining my life."

"I can hear that it feels that big. Let's talk about it again on _____, and I will tell you exactly what I want to see before then."

WHY

A date and a condition give them something to work on. A flat no gives them something to fight.

"I'll just use my friend's phone."

"You probably could. I would rather set this up with you than have you working around me."

WHY

Avoids threatening a rule you cannot enforce, which is how you lose the next conversation too.

When your answer is not yet

"Not yet. Here is what I want to see first: _____. When that is steady for a while, we will get one."

WHY

Names the thing that would change your mind, so waiting becomes something they can affect.

The first two weeks set the pattern for the year. Keep your reactions small and your attention steady.

WEEK ONE

- ☐ Set it up side by side on day one
- ☐ Start the overnight charging spot on **night one**
- ☐ Turn notifications down to the few that matter
- ☐ On day three ask: **what has it been good for?**
- ☐ Say nothing about the amount of use yet

WEEK TWO

- ☐ Look at the screen time numbers **together**
- ☐ Let them react to the number first
- ☐ Pick **one** thing to change, not five
- ☐ Put the review date in your calendar
- ☐ Tell them one thing they have handled well

Normal, leave it alone

- Checking it constantly for the first week
- Wanting it at the table
- Testing the bedtime rule once
- Being on it more than you expected at first
- Wanting apps their friends have

Worth a closer look

- Turning the screen away when you walk in
- Getting to sleep later week after week
- Dropping something they used to love
- Coming off it upset and not saying why
- Going quiet about who they are talking to

Check the numbers together. Looking at your kid's screen time behind their back is the fastest way to make sure they stop telling you anything.

Something will happen. Deciding your **first sentence** now is the whole exercise, because that is the part you will get wrong in the moment.

They saw something they should not have

First say: "Thanks for telling me. You are not in trouble."

Then: ask what they saw and where, block it together, and leave the conversation open rather than finishing it with a rule.

Someone they do not know messaged them

First say: "You did the right thing bringing this to me."

Then: screenshot it, block and report together, and tell them plainly that this is why you asked for the account to stay private.

They broke the agreement

First say: "Tell me what happened."

Then: use the consequence you already agreed on. Consequences that connect to the phone work. Ones invented while you are angry do not.

It is lost or broken

First say: "Okay. Where did you last have it?"

Then: apply whatever you wrote in box 2 on page 4. This is why you decided it in advance.

Openers worth having ready. Any of these keeps the conversation going long enough for you to hear the rest of it.

"I am glad you came to me first."

"Start from the beginning."

"I am not angry. I want to understand it."

"That cannot have been easy to bring up."

"Okay. What do you need from me right now?"

This kit was your half of the job. The month after the phone arrives belongs to them, and it is the part that decides how this goes.

Your First Phone

A workbook written to your kid, not to you. They learn how the phone is built to hold their attention, then spend four weeks setting it up so it works for them. It ends with a phone agreement they help write, which is the kind they keep.

WEEK 1

Their settings

WEEK 2

Phone-free zones

WEEK 3

Their offline life

WEEK 4

The agreement

balancebychoice.com/workbooks/your-first-phone

Also for younger kids

Screen Smart for Kids, ages 8 to 10. Builds the stopping skill before a phone is anywhere near the picture.

Also for you

Because They Want To. The conversations behind all of it, one topic at a time.

Expect this to be bumpy. It will be, however ready your kid looked on paper, and that is not a sign that something has gone wrong. What matters more than any rule you set is that your kid keeps coming to you when something happens. Learning to choose balance takes years, and the agreement you write this month will need changing by the next one. Treat it as something you keep coming back to together, rather than a job you finish.