Spark nz

First Phone Guide



In partnership with:

Parenting Place

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Introduction

Deciding if and when your child is ready for their first phone can be difficult. There's no magic age and no one-size-fits-all answer.

This guide has been created by Spark and developed in collaboration with digital safety and parenting experts, including Makes Sense Aotearoa founders Jo Robertson and Holly Brooker, Parenting Place coach Sheridan Eketone, Netsafe Chief Online Safety Officer Sean Lyons, and child psychologist Dr Melanie Woodfield, combined with insights from parents nationwide.

It's designed to help families navigate their child's first phone journey, including what's prompting the conversation about getting one, what their child is ready for, what needs to be in place before it arrives, and how to keep supporting them along the way.

This isn't a test. You don't need every box ticked before saying yes. An unticked box is simply a useful place to start a conversation or put some support in place. Remember, a first phone doesn't have to mean a smartphone, internet access, gaming and social media all at once. You can introduce access in stages and adapt it over time as your child's needs and circumstances change.

Notes:

As you and your child are working through this guide, jot down any notes or questions here for future reference.

What do we actually need right now?

Before considering whether your child is ready for their own phone, take a moment to think about what you're trying to solve and what you've tried already.

Before a child has their own phone, they may be more open to talking about what it could mean, asking questions and exploring expectations together. Use this time to understand their perspective and build a foundation for future conversations.

It's okay to decide the answer is "not yet".

The first conversation doesn't need to end with a phone. In fact, research with New Zealand parents shows the journey from first conversations to handing over a phone can take one to four years, giving families time to talk, prepare and decide what works for them.

- [ ] **We're clear on why we're considering a phone**
  Is it about staying in touch with family and friends, travelling independently, moving between households, coordinating activities, accessing transport information or something else?
- [ ] **We've considered all our options**
  Depending on what our child needs, a shared family phone, basic phone or smart watch may meet that need for now.
- [ ] **We've considered both the bene its and what might change**
  A phone can make some things easier, but it can also introduce new experiences and risks. Every family and circumstance will be different, so take some time to weigh up the benefits and trade-offs.
- [ ] **We have a back-up plan**
  A phone can be a helpful tool, but it may not always be available. We've talked with our child about what they could do if their phone is lost, flat or damaged, there's no reception, or they can't access it for another reason. They know what to do if they miss the bus, plans change or they can't get hold of us.



Talk about it. Ask your child:

- What would having your own phone make easier?
- What are you most looking forward to being able to do with your phone?
- What might become harder with a phone?
- Why do you think you need one now?
- What could you do if you needed help and didn't have a phone?
- What times of the day/week would you like to have a phone, and when would it not be needed?

Are we ready for a first phone?

Once you're clear about why a phone might be useful, think about whether you and your child – along with your wider parenting network are ready.

A first phone can bring new opportunities, greater independence and some new responsibilities and risks too which will require support.

Remember, readiness isn't something children need to have fully mastered before getting a phone.

Judgement, responsibility and digital confidence are skills you can help them develop through supported experiences over time.

- [ ] **We agree on what the phone is for**
  We've talked about what our child needs it to do now and understand that this doesn't mean giving them access to everything a phone can do at once, or providing access to it 24/7.
- [ ] **Our child can generally follow agreed rules and boundaries**
  They understand that having more independence also means responsibilities, including following agreed family expectations, even when they don't always agree with them.
- [ ] **They show reasonable judgement for their age**
  They can stop and think before acting, recognise when something doesn't feel right and ask an adult for help when they're unsure.
- [ ] **They can take on responsibility**
  They're building habits around looking after belongings, remembering commitments, managing their time and taking responsibility when something goes wrong.
- [ ] **We can talk openly with each other**
  Our child is reasonably comfortable telling us when something has gone wrong, feels uncomfortable or they've made a mistake.

- [ ] **We've talked about pressure from friends and other people**
  Our child understands that different families have different rules, and "everyone else has one" doesn't have to determine what happens in our family.
- [ ] **We, as parents or caregivers, are ready too**
  We have the time and willingness to set expectations, learn about the technology, have ongoing conversations and adjust our approach as our child grows. If we're parenting separately, we have a basic agreement around core principles, themes, rules and safety measures, even if these look different at each house.
- [ ] **We've thought about the behaviour we model**
  Where possible, the expectations we set around attention, respectful communication, phone-free time and healthy phone use are reflected in our own habits too.



Keep in mind: If we answered 'not yet' to several of these questions, that's okay. Rather than trying to tackle everything at once, choose one or two areas to work on together first, then come back to the guide and see what's changed. Age and school year can be useful context, but they're only part of the picture. Practical need, judgement, responsibility, communication and your family's circumstances can tell you more about readiness.

Talk about it. Ask your child:

- If you see something upsetting, rude, embarrassing, scary or just a bit strange online, how do you think you'd feel? What could we do together to help?
- What do you think you should be responsible for if you have your own phone?
- What do you think should be private on your phone, and what should I be able to check at any time?
- Phones are designed to be really engaging. That can mean they are hard to put down. How do you think you can manage that yourself? How can we help you manage that?
  (E.g. parental controls with time limits for certain apps, taking the phone away at different times of the day)

What do we need to put in place?

If you've decided a phone is right for your family, the next step is deciding what access your child needs now, what can wait and what expectations everyone agrees to.

Consider writing your key expectations down as a simple family phone agreement. Keep it short enough that everyone can understand it, remember it and revisit it.

- [ ] **We've chosen the right level of connection for now**
  We've considered calls and messaging, internet access, apps, gaming and social media separately, rather than treating getting a phone as automatic access to everything the device can do.

- [ ] **We've considered screen time limits and parental controls**
  We've considered what safety measures are right for our child, including parental controls, filtering, screen-time limits and downtime. Need help setting them up? Visit Spark's Parent Hub for practical guidance.

- [ ] **We've agreed on our family phone rules together**
  We've talked about when and where phones can be used (including at school, during meals and family time), when phones are put away at night, where they charge, and any phone-free places or times. It might be worth writing these down so they can be referred to from time to time.

- [ ] **We've discussed online connections and grooming**
  How someone, even a person they know or trust, might manipulate or pressure them to keep secrets, share photos or personal information, or meet in person. Our child knows they can come to us if anything feels uncomfortable or uncertain, regardless of who it involves. For more support visit netsafe.org.nz/online-abuse-and-harassment.

- [ ] **We've talked about personal information and set up appropriate safety, privacy and security settings**
  Together, we've checked privacy settings, location sharing, app permissions, content settings and who can contact our child. We've also talked about what information should stay private and not be shared online, including passwords, addresses and location information.

- [ ] **We have a plan for when something doesn't feel right**
  Our child understands that not everything they see or receive online is accurate or genuine, including AI-generated content, scams and messages designed to create pressure or urgency. They know to pause, avoid clicking or responding if they're unsure, and come to us if they see upsetting or inappropriate content, experience bullying or unwanted contact, make a mistake or feel unsafe – without worrying that asking for help will automatically mean losing their phone. For more information on when things go wrong visit Spark's Parent Hub.
- [ ] **We've talked about taking and sharing photos and videos**
  Our child understands they should ask before photographing or filming someone, and before posting, forwarding or sharing an image or video of them. They know that someone can say no or change their mind, and that the same rules apply to how others use images of them.
- [ ] **We've talked about money and looking after the phone**
  Everyone understands what happens with data use, paid apps and in-app purchases, as well as what happens if the phone is lost, damaged or needs replacing.
- [ ] **Important contacts are easy to find**
  Home, parents, caregivers or other trusted adults are saved clearly, and our child knows who to call and what to do if they need help.

Talk about it. Agree together:

Keep in mind: We're learning together. Review how things are going weekly or monthly and adjust as needed. Where possible, align on key values and expectations with other adults who care for your child. If alignment isn't possible, clear, consistent communication at home still provides a strong foundation.

Remember, online safety is a shared responsibility. Platforms, apps and service providers also have a role through safety features, reporting tools and support. Understanding these options can help you and your child navigate online experiences confidently.



- When will the phone be on and when will it be put away?
- Which apps, games or features are okay now, and which ones can wait?
- What information should stay private?
- What should you do if you see something upsetting, confusing or difficult to trust?
- What happens if we don't follow our agreement?
- How often should we check in together about how things are going with your phone?

How will we keep supporting them as they grow?

Handover isn't the end of the first-phone journey. While our children have grown up in the digital age and may be confident using technology, that doesn't necessarily mean a child has the judgement or experience to handle every situation they encounter online.

As they become more independent, we can stay interested in their online life, notice when they need help and adjust our support together.

- [ ] **We make digital life part of everyday conversation**
  We regularly talk about what they're watching, playing, creating, sharing and who they're connecting with – not just when something goes wrong. We make space for conversations about privacy, kindness, group chats, peer pressure, harmful content and bullying.
- [ ] **Any monitoring is clear, proportionate and understood**
  Our child knows what we can see or check and why. We're aiming to support safe independence rather than secretly monitoring everything they do.
- [ ] **We know the signs that it may be time to step in**
  We pay attention to significant changes in sleep, mood, school, activities, relationships or phone habits, as well as repeated conflict or distress.
- [ ] **We have a way to respond when something goes wrong**
  We listen and work through any issues together. Depending on what happened, we may change a setting or boundary, contact the school or platform, or seek specialist advice.
- [ ] **We revisit the rules rather than setting them once**
  Screen time, apps, social media, monitoring and other boundaries can change as circumstances or maturity change. That might mean allowing more freedom at times, or bringing back limits and support when needed. Settings can move in either direction – and that's okay.

Keep in mind: If your child tells you something has gone wrong, focus first on helping them. If they believe asking for help will automatically result in punishment or losing their phone, they may be less likely to come to you next time. Remember, not every challenging online experience leads to harm. With your support, learning how to manage risks can help your child feel more confident online.

It can also be helpful to share your own experiences too. Sometimes a conversation can start more naturally with a comment than a direct question. For example:

"I've noticed I get really distracted by notifications on my phone. Do you find that happens to you too?"

"Sometimes I find it hard to stop scrolling, even when I have other things to do. Have you ever felt like that?"

You can then explore together what might help, like turning off notifications, setting app limits or making time to put your phones away.



Talk about it. Every so often, ask:

- What's the best thing about having your phone at the moment?
- Have you seen or received anything recently that didn't seem quite right or that you weren't sure you could trust?
- Is there anything you think you're ready to manage more independently?
- Is there anything you'd like more help from us with?

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Need more support?

You don't need to navigate the first-phone journey alone. Whether you need help choosing appropriate apps, setting up parental controls or working through an online-safety issue, these resources are a useful place to start.

Spark Parent Hub

Free practical guidance for parents on first devices, online safety, screen time, social media, gaming and digital wellbeing, including resources developed with trusted parenting and online-safety experts.

spark.co.nz/parenthub

Spark Kids Plan

New Zealand's first mobile plan built specifically for kids and designed with parents in mind, offering another option for families who are ready to introduce mobile connectivity.

spark.co.nz/kidsplan

Parenting Place

Practical parenting guidance and tools to help families navigate first devices, boundaries, screen time and staying connected as children grow online.

parentingplace.nz

Netsafe

Independent New Zealand online-safety information, tools and support for parents, whānau, children and young people.

netsafe.org.nz