



Advice for Parents of Teens on Digital Devices

The guidelines below are offered as advice for parents. While parental control software and settings can be useful for providing a safety barrier, they are not a stand-alone solution and are not foolproof. Keeping students safe online depends on having clear expectations, rules, and accountability for students' technology use. Please note that we also have a

[☰ Guide for Parents on Setting up Student Laptops](#) .

Establish Clear Structure and Boundaries

- **Use the laptop in common spaces:** In order for parents to be aware of what students are doing online, it is helpful to establish the expectation that laptops are mostly used in common space (like the living room or kitchen) instead of in the student's bedroom. Parents should establish with students the expectation that they will be frequently checking on what students are doing online, and the laptop is not the student's private device.
- **No devices in the bedroom at night:** Sleep is essential for healthy growth, and digital devices often interfere with it. Choose a time (e.g. 9:00pm) at which point all digital devices must be put away. Make no exceptions, even for homework.
- **Create phone-free zones or times:** Establish specific times, such as family meals or car rides, where all devices are put away.
- **Set expectations for new apps:** Require your student to get permission before downloading new applications or making digital purchases. Enforce this using Apple ScreenTime controls.
- **Encourage digital norms:** Discuss expectations and rules for online communication. Discuss what to do when students are confronted with inappropriate content or conduct online. While content filters provide safeguards, they are not foolproof.
- **Establish the expectation (and exercise it!) that parents have complete control over the laptop**, and will want to see what students are doing on the device. While it is natural for teens to seek privacy as they grow and establish their personal identities, there should be no expectation of privacy on the student's laptop. The stakes are too high. Parental oversight needs to include knowing what the student is doing online.
- **For parents who also allow their student to have a phone**, there are additional concerns and needs, but the same rules and expectations should apply. Parents need to be aware of the risks and dangers that exist online, and help students develop into safe

and effective users of digital tools. Phones open up another can of worms in this regard, and raise the stakes higher.

Use Technology Controls

- **Parents own the device and should be the "Administrator" on it.** Students, particularly in Middle School, should be set up with "Standard User" accounts, not Admin accounts. This prevents students from changing settings or installing additional apps. Parents should not give the Administrator password to their student, as it defeats the purpose.
 - The first account you set up when going through a new MacBook's welcome screen is an administrator of the laptop with full access to all settings and controls. The password for this account should be held by parents, not students.
 - Then add an account for your child to use to log into the laptop. This is done in System Settings... Users & Groups... Add User. This will be a "Standard User" account as you set it up -- Standard is the default when creating a new account.
- **Use Apple's ScreenTime parent controls:** Use [Apple's "Family Sharing" feature](#) in order to [set up a "child account"](#) for your student.
 - This requires creating an Apple ID account for your student, and designating it as a "child account" as you create it. You then sign into the student's Apple ID (under System Settings... Sign In) on their MacBook. Setting the various options for ScreenTime controls can then be done from either your own Apple device, or on your student's MacBook, but may work better from the student's MacBook (see below).
- **Implement content filtering:** [Apple ScreenTime Family Sharing controls](#) can be used to [block inappropriate content](#) and access to apps on Apple devices, though its efficacy and reporting is limited. This depends on the parent being the "administrator" on the student's laptop, and the student having a "standard user" account, so that they don't turn off the controls.
 - The ability to set [daily time limits](#) and/or block any apps or websites is a useful feature within Apple ScreenTime.
 - It is more effective to adjust certain ScreenTime settings directly on the student's laptop instead of trying to do it remotely from the parent's device, especially when blocking particular websites. Log into ScreenTime on your student's laptop using your parental PIN code. You will be prompted to enter the code if/when you attempt to edit any ScreenTime settings.
 - The individual website blocking feature of ScreenTime is tied to Apple's Web browser (Safari). If the student has another web browser such as Google Chrome installed, it will not necessarily block websites on that browser. For this reason, parents might want to avoid allowing the installation of additional web browsers and apps.
 - While Apple ScreenTime can be set to block explicit content, it's not a guarantee. Parents might also benefit from using the network content filtering that internet service providers (such as Verizon or Comcast) include on their routers.

- *Content filtering is not a substitute for parental oversight. You will still need to physically check up on your child's online activity.*
- **Block Messages App on the laptop**
 - Apple Screen Time can be used to [block the Messages app](#) on students' laptops, and any other apps the parents want to block. To do this, you use the "time limits" feature of Screen Time and set the time limit to "0" minutes.
- **Social Media Supervision:** Many platforms like Instagram, TikTok, and Snapchat now offer "Family Center" or "Family Pairing" features that allow you to see who your student is messaging (though not the content of the messages) and set time limits.
- **Reduce oversaturated colors on phones.** There is [a setting under the Accessibility options](#) on iPhones to turn down the color intensity. Reducing the color saturation makes the phone feel less like an addictive slot machine.
- **Dealing with YouTube** can be challenging. Since there are good curricular uses of it, blocking it would prevent students being able to use it for school or for other positive purposes. It's important to develop ongoing communication with students on their experience with YouTube and other video sites. With so many video sharing websites accessible to students, it's important to have ongoing discussions about staying safe online and avoiding exposure to inappropriate content, along with the issues of distraction, wasting time, and digital addiction.

Maintain Open Communication

- **Talk about values:** Discuss your family's values regarding kindness, respect, and empathy in online spaces. There should be ongoing conversation about technology use, and the risks and benefits it opens up.
- **Promote social media literacy:** Talk with your student about recognizing deceptive practices by tech companies and how social media may be designed to be "rewarding" and hard to stop.
- **Establish expectations for positive use of the laptop,** and talk about these expectations on a regular basis. Anything that a student is doing on the laptop should be something that parents have a "right" to see at any time, without any delay or pushback. The stakes are too high -- a student's laptop life is not the place for privacy. Technology companies design their products to be addictive and that they make money by monopolizing users' attention. Students need our help to establish and enforce good habits and rules for using digital devices, and this should include time-limits and reflecting on how devices can help us or hurt us.
- **Emphasize the "4 R's":** Before giving students more digital freedom, ensure your student understands their Responsibility, the Rules, the Risks, and their Reasons for wanting more access. Parenting teens with digital devices necessitates balancing trust with control. Showing interest and support in your student's digital life makes rules more effective. At the same time, talking through and establishing the consequences for not adhering to the rules is also important.
- **For parents who want greater control, or parents who are dealing with challenges to the established rules and norms,** there are parental control apps such as [Qustodio](#)

or [Net Nanny](#). These paid subscription services open up a range of parental controls and options for monitoring student activity. They require installation by the parent onto the student's device and require that the student does not have "Admin" access to the laptop. These apps provide a much deeper level of parental control and oversight of student activity. They can also be used on cell phones.

- **In all of this we don't want to lose sight of the benefits of digital devices.** They are powerful tools for research, communication, and collaboration which is why we embrace them as a school. We need to highlight these positive possibilities and outcomes in our work with students, and mitigate the risks with clear expectations, rules, and practices.

Monitor for Problematic Use

- **Parents should have their student's password(s)** to get into the student's accounts and should check on these accounts occasionally, looking at web browsing histories and online communications.
- **Parents should be alert to the possibility of student devices interfering with sleep, social activity, and physical activity:** Ensure that your student's device usage is not interfering with their sleep, physical activity, or in-person socializing. The device belongs to you the parent and should be treated as such.
- **Parents should be aware of gaming or social media overuse:** Be concerned if your student shows impaired control over their online activity, prioritizing it over all other interests, or continuing its use despite negative consequences like falling grades.
- **Parents should be monitoring text messaging:** How you do this is a parenting decision that works best when paired with strategies that promote open communication.

Promote Focus and Study Habits

- **Model positive habits** with digital devices. When parents model appropriate use, it helps children understand appropriate use. Asking students about their school work, supporting their growth, and celebrating their intellectual use of devices will also help set a positive trajectory for home use of devices.
- **Dispel the myth of multitasking:** Students may feel like it's ok to have a netflix show running in the background while they do homework, believing they can devote attention to two things at once. This has been disproven by researchers, and students should have guardrails put in place by parents to prevent media distraction. Similarly, the constant use of earpods to listen to media can be a distraction. While there are some students who may benefit from background music, care must be taken to avoid allowing earpods to become omnipresent. We encourage students needing music to do so with computer speakers so that parents can be aware of this media stream and avoid allowing it to become a distraction.

Get Device Insurance

- **Accidental damage insurance is highly recommended for student laptops.**
Students are at high risk for accidental damage to their laptop because they carry them around everyday, and because they might not understand how fragile these devices are. Having a dedicated carrying case can help protect the laptop in transit, and parents should speak with students about being careful when moving the device around, as well as being careful with power cords that can easily become entangled and cause the laptop to be pulled off a surface and fall to the floor. Accidental damage insurance can be purchased from Apple at the time of buying a laptop, or can be purchased from a third-party provider at any time.

Tips for Parents Regarding Artificial Intelligence:

The parent resources linked below are from [Research Tips for parents: Raising resilient learners in an AI world](#) published by the Brookings Institute, Rebecca Winthrop and Emma Venetis, 2026:

- [What is generative AI and what's at stake for kids?](#)
- [Helping kids stay thinkers in the age of generative AI](#)
- [Losing the human touch: When AI replaces real interaction](#)
- [Reigniting curiosity in the age of AI](#)
- [The power of productive struggle](#)
- [Using AI to enhance, not replace creativity and imagination](#)
- [Guarding your child's data footprint](#)
- [When teachers lose trust in student work](#)
- [Helping kids question what AI tells them](#)
- [Keeping human skills at the center in an AI world](#)

Also See:

- [Social Media and Technology Recommendations for Middle School Families](#)
- [2026-27 Electronic Devices Policy \[For Students and Families\]](#)
- [Apple's documentation for Family Sharing, Screen Time, and child accounts](#)
- Wirecutter article: [How to introduce technology to kids](#)