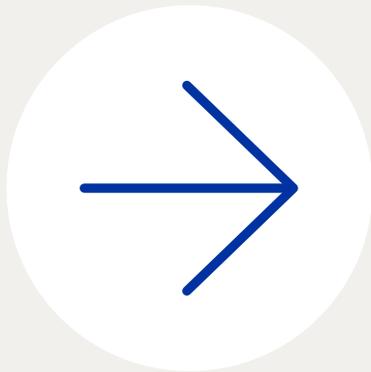
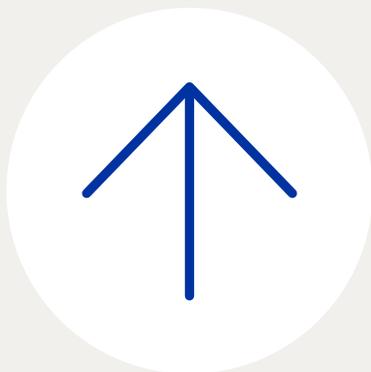
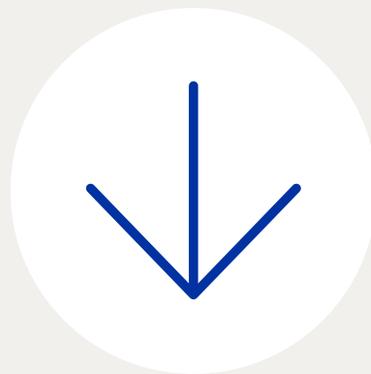


The



Family

Tech



Cycle

Navigating Screens,
Devices, and Social Media

Amanda Lenhart

Winter 2026

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Foreword

Conversations about children and technology tend to cluster around moments of acquisition: When should a child get a phone? Is this app appropriate? Is it too early—or already too late? These questions are important but can obscure a deeper challenge that families experience more continuously. Parenting around technology is not episodic or occasional; it is constant.

Today's families are navigating a world in which digital tools have entered nearly every aspect of childhood, offering opportunities for learning, play, creativity, and social connection. A smartwatch might be a precursor to a phone; a game opens the door to a social network; a classroom tool comes home. Each transition creates real stakes for children's development and family relationships, requiring parents to develop (or reassess) boundaries and expectations. Meanwhile, the technology itself keeps changing—adding new features, new risks, and new pressures—often faster than families can reasonably adapt.

This is the context in which we undertook the work behind this report. Across our research, the idea of “tech parenting” has surfaced again and again. It appears less tied to a particular product or platform than a defining feature of modern family life. Parents are increasingly asked to invest more cognitive and emotional labor on behalf of children who are themselves growing, changing, and seeking independence. The defining term we heard repeatedly is “exhaustion”—because the systems they are navigating were not designed with family needs at the center.

This report offers a reframing that helps make sense of that experience. Rather than treating technology decisions as isolated moments, it introduces the technology parenting cycle as a way to understand what families are actually living through. The cycle captures the repeated rhythm of deciding whether to introduce a device or platform, navigating the complexity of setup and expectations, and managing use over time as children develop and technologies evolve. Even within the same household, what works for one child may not work for another.

By naming this cycle, we can better see the mismatch between how products are typically designed and how they are actually used in family life. Parents take on diverse roles including translator, moderator, and steward of their children's digital experiences. Children, for their part, are active learners, negotiators, and meaning-makers who care deeply about fairness, autonomy, and connection.

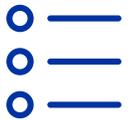
The insights in this report are grounded in co-design with children and families themselves. We worked alongside families to understand their priorities, frustrations, and ideas. What emerged are not polished product concepts but rather signals about families' unmet needs: for defaults that reduce cognitive load, for tools that grow with children's capacities, for designs that acknowledge developmental differences, and for experiences that strengthen—rather than strain—family relationships.

This report is intended for a broad audience across research, industry, education, policy, philanthropy, and the next generation of practitioners entering these fields. While each of these communities brings different levers and responsibilities, they share a common challenge: translating what we know about children's development and family dynamics into systems that actually help in practice. That "last mile" is where good intentions often falter—and where thoughtful design can make a meaningful difference.

Our invitation is not to prescribe a single approach or set of solutions, but to encourage a shift in perspective. What would it mean to design technologies that assume families are navigating a cycle, not a moment? How might products, policies, and practices take pressure off families rather than add to it?

The families who contributed to this work have already offered their insight and imagination. The challenge now is for the rest of us to listen—and to design accordingly.

Michael Preston
Executive Director
Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop



Executive Summary

All families are on a parenting journey the moment a child joins their family. Parenting around technology is a key throughline on this path, with a cyclical pattern of repeated steps along the way. For parents, the cycle begins early, with the decision to bring a tool, platform, or app into the family's technology ecosystem. The cycle then moves to setting up and establishing norms around its use, followed by ongoing management of the tool until the next new device clamors for a spot in the home, on the wrist, or in the pocket. We call this pattern the **technology parenting cycle**.

The Joan Ganz Cooney Center collaborated with parents and kids ages 4-14 to brainstorm ideas and approaches to help manage the challenges that emerge for families at each stage, or across stages, of the tech parenting cycle. Our conversations provided invaluable insights into where kids and parents most need support, and what is and isn't helpful to them as they navigate this journey together in an increasingly tech-infused world.

In the spring of 2025, the Joan Ganz Cooney Center and our partners at The GIANT Room, supported by Verizon's Responsible Business Digital Wellness Initiative, conducted nine co-design sessions with parents and children in three US cities. The goal of the sessions was to learn about challenges around technology facing kids and parents, and brainstorm new resources and activities to support parents and kids in the acquisition and management of these devices in ways that emphasize playfulness, fun, strong family relationships, and healthy digital habits for all.

This report uplifts what kids and parents told us, and offers recommendations around the kinds of resources and tools that designers, educators, and policymakers can create in response. Fundamentally, many parents are deeply worried about the choices they are making around technology and their children's future.

They crave support in managing devices and screen time with and for their children. We encourage a more systemic approach in which hardware and software developers take a more proactive role in creating tools, content, and products to address these concerns in a playful way.

Insights & Takeaways

Parents want apps, platforms, and devices with default kid-friendly settings

Parents are exhausted by constant management, complex technical requirements, and hidden controls in the devices they acquire for and use with their families. They want simplified solutions and more kid-specific default settings at unboxing and onboarding to lighten these burdens.

Kids' ages and developmental stages matter

A child's age and maturity are important factors when it comes to device set up, digital literacy materials, and management approaches for parents. What works for, engages, and answers the worries and fears of a 7-9 year old is not necessarily the same for a 10-12 year old.

Younger kids want to partner with parents for fun—sometimes silly, sometimes serious—conversations and decision-making around devices. Kids want transparency from parents around why certain rules are imposed, and want to see that parents are also accountable to the same rules (e.g., no phones at the dinner table).

Older children are more focused on demonstrating independence and maturity, expressing curiosity about behind-the-scenes use of their data, and seeking opportunities for partnering with and learning from family members in ways that allow them to preserve some privacy and gain more autonomy.

Transform uncertainty into confidence for families

Families struggle to determine when a child is ready for a new device or platform. More clarity on which components of maturity, executive functioning, self-management, and awareness will increase the likelihood of a successful move to a new device, and will help parents and kids alike. Parents crave lightweight, meaningful, effective, and ideally FUN digital literacy education for themselves and their families—including extended families, caregivers, and co-parents—delivered through assets such as videos, family conversation starters, games, and other tools that resonate with kids. Creating ways to demonstrate and document digital literacy knowledge as well as components of maturity will also help families feel more confident in their technology choices.

Opportunities for Designers

Designers have an immediate opportunity to make families' lives easier, especially during unboxing, onboarding, and early device use. Ensuring that designs and products are tightly calibrated to the age and developmental stage of child users is critical, and building tools intentionally with digital literacy, safety, and healthy engagement in mind can make a meaningful difference in the experience for both parents and children.

Unboxing and default settings

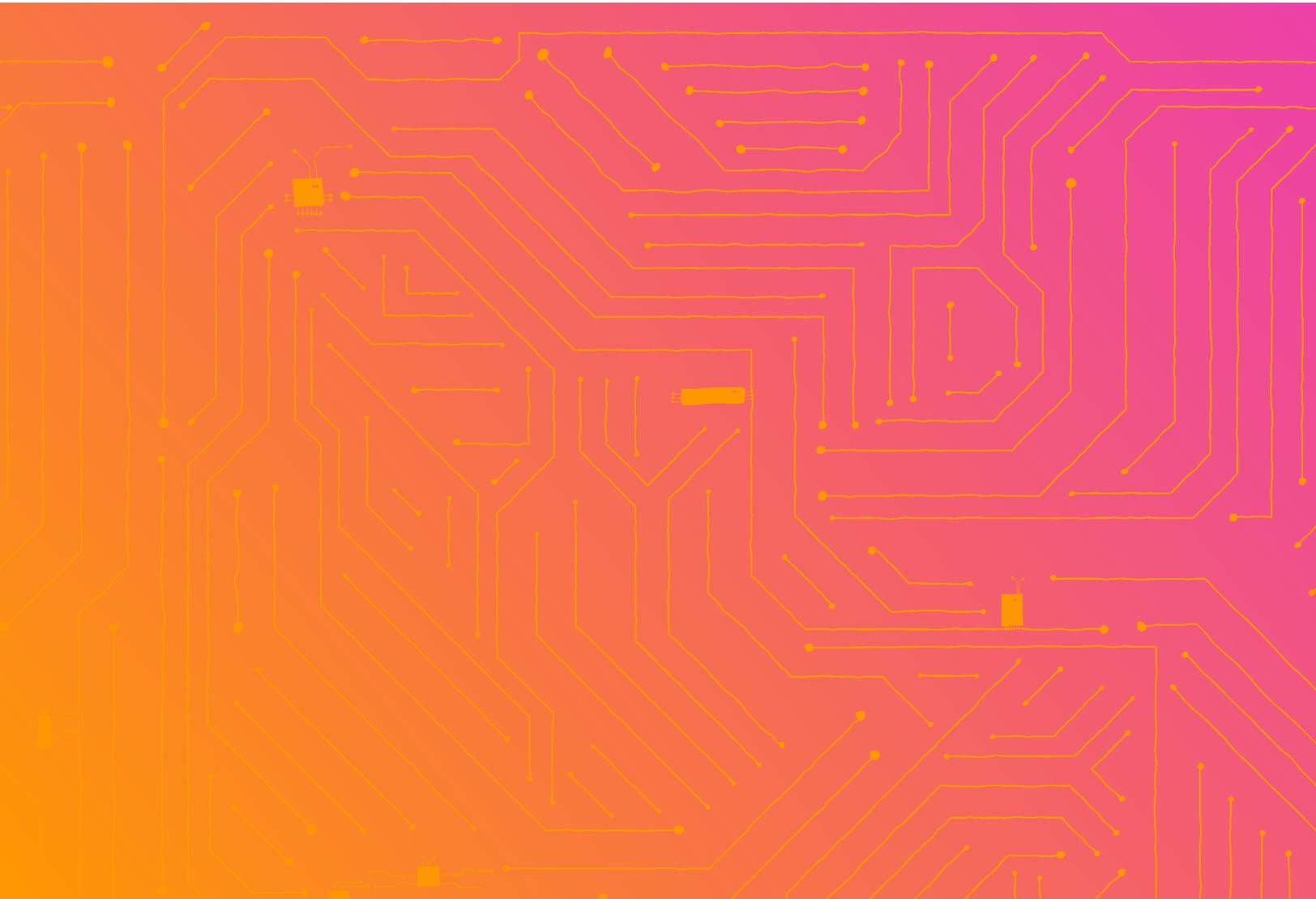
- + Create a dedicated onboarding process or unboxing flow for new apps, platforms, and devices—especially smartphones—that is tiered by age or stage of development.
- + Make apps age-accessible with plain explanatory language and safety settings on by default—private profiles, location data off, data privacy for younger users.
- + Don't monetize child safety features or parent controls.

Digital literacy and readiness tools

- + Create tools that allow families to document online or in-person behaviors that signal readiness for new features, apps, or devices.
- + Give children the opportunity to learn to self-regulate, and earn new privileges and features.
- + Support ongoing literacy development and conversations by creating playful digital literacy content such as a Would You Rather? card deck or anime-inspired narrative digital literacy content.
- + Develop a curriculum, banded by age, that teaches kids the skills needed to use increasingly sophisticated and complicated devices, apps, and platforms.

Kid-friendly form factors and experiences

- + Create more technical and hardware offerings for families, including new phone form factors, simplified software modes, kid-oriented operating systems, and easier paths to throttling back the functions of phones and then gradually unlocking them as kids age and grow.
- + Acknowledge the social challenges that screen time limits present to kids playing or talking online with friends, and design features that allow them a gracious rather than abrupt exit.
- + Use filters and AI to help kids have the choice to shield themselves from unwanted, upsetting, or frightening content.





What Do Kids and Families Need to Navigate the Tech Parenting Cycle?

American parents¹ are confronted with a series of decisions about how they will bring smartphones, digital tools, video games, and social platforms into their children's lives. These decisions are especially challenging because parents must determine what, when, and how—and figure out separately if each of their children is old enough and mature enough to have their own cellphone or use various games, platforms, and tools. Once they've given their children these technologies, there is constant management of their use, content, and practices across devices, and the experiences these technologies enable. Further, children continue to learn, grow, and develop their own agency, requiring parents to continually adjust to their child's developmental stage. Parents also learn and grow along

with their children, while technology is constantly evolving with new releases that change existing functionality. Even if parents decide to limit or avoid specific devices or platforms, children will be exposed to them by friends, media, and school.

...it's a constant battle. Maybe I'm not parenting in the right way, but it's like constant stress that is exhausting—it's put on me, and then it makes me mad that I have to deal with it.

—PARENT IN ASHLAND, MISSOURI

¹ Throughout this report, where we use the term "parent" we mean all parents, guardians, or primary caregivers of a child.

These decisions faced by parents form the foundation of what we call the **technology parenting cycle**. This cycle of device management and acquisition repeats as a family adds new devices and tools to its tech ecosystem over time, building on previous experiences.

Our research team's conversations with families suggest that parents feel overwhelmed and ill-equipped to navigate this constant decision-making in a sea of ever-changing tech, hard-to-find parental controls, and media narratives that often oversimplify or pathologize children's technology use. As one parent in Ashland, Missouri told us: "...it's a constant battle. Maybe I'm not parenting in the right way, but it's like constant stress that is exhausting—it's put on me, and then it makes me mad that I have to deal with it." Another Ashland parent shared, "We could spend hours of our day trying to figure out what to do about all of this content and media, and I'm tired of it being on parents." These voices underscore how deeply parents feel the burden of managing their children's digital lives.

This project was designed to support both designers and families by sharing a new way of thinking about digital parenting—one that acknowledges that parents have already been making these decisions about kids' tech use since their children's earliest years, and yet still crave more support. We partnered with kids and parents in different areas of the country to co-design ideas for playful and fun resources and tools that families could use to change their approach to technology like tablets, watches, and phones. We worked with a diverse group of families with children ages 4-14 to understand their immediate challenges, and collaboratively design materials that will support families with these complex decisions, teach kids about appropriate tech use in fun ways, and help bring families closer together through this time of increasing independence.

DIGITAL LITERACY

When we use the term digital literacy, we mean teaching how to access, evaluate, and think critically about online information—and how to responsibly and safely manage personal use and interactions with others through digital devices.



Parents and kids at the West Side YMCA in New York City



What We Did

The co-design method and process

Project goals

- + Better understand the joys and concerns of diverse families as they navigate introducing new technology, in particular cell phones, to their child or children.
- + Co-design digital literacy tools with kids and their families to support children in responsive and safe smart phone and other digital device use. Work with kids and families to design resources and solutions to help other families navigate family life and technology.
- + Co-design features for cell phones, digital devices, apps, and platforms that are kid- and family-friendly and address families' current needs.
- + Focus on solutions that support a strong kid and parent partnership to navigate technology together, laying the foundation for ongoing family dialogue to better address future issues.



Co-designing in New York

WHAT IS CO-DESIGN?

Co-design brings together kids, teachers, and families with a variety of stakeholders (industry designers, policymakers, and/or researchers) to shape the design of products, policies, and experiences that affect kids, schools, and family lives. Co-design means collaborating with potential users or audiences—kids, parents, or educators—throughout the design process of a product intended for them. The process involves gathering users' needs and requirements to brainstorming to iterative evaluation. Co-design gives kids and other end users more power and voice in the design process, and can frequently lead to surprising, innovative, and more effective end-products.

Project process

In March 2025, the Joan Ganz Cooney Center team conducted hour-long interviews with nine parents from different parts of the country, living in different types of communities and within different family structures. We used what we learned in these conversations to shape our co-design workshops, planning around the joys, fears, and hopes these parents of 7- to 12-year old kids shared about how tablets, smartwatches, smartphones, and social media might (or might not) show up in their children's lives.

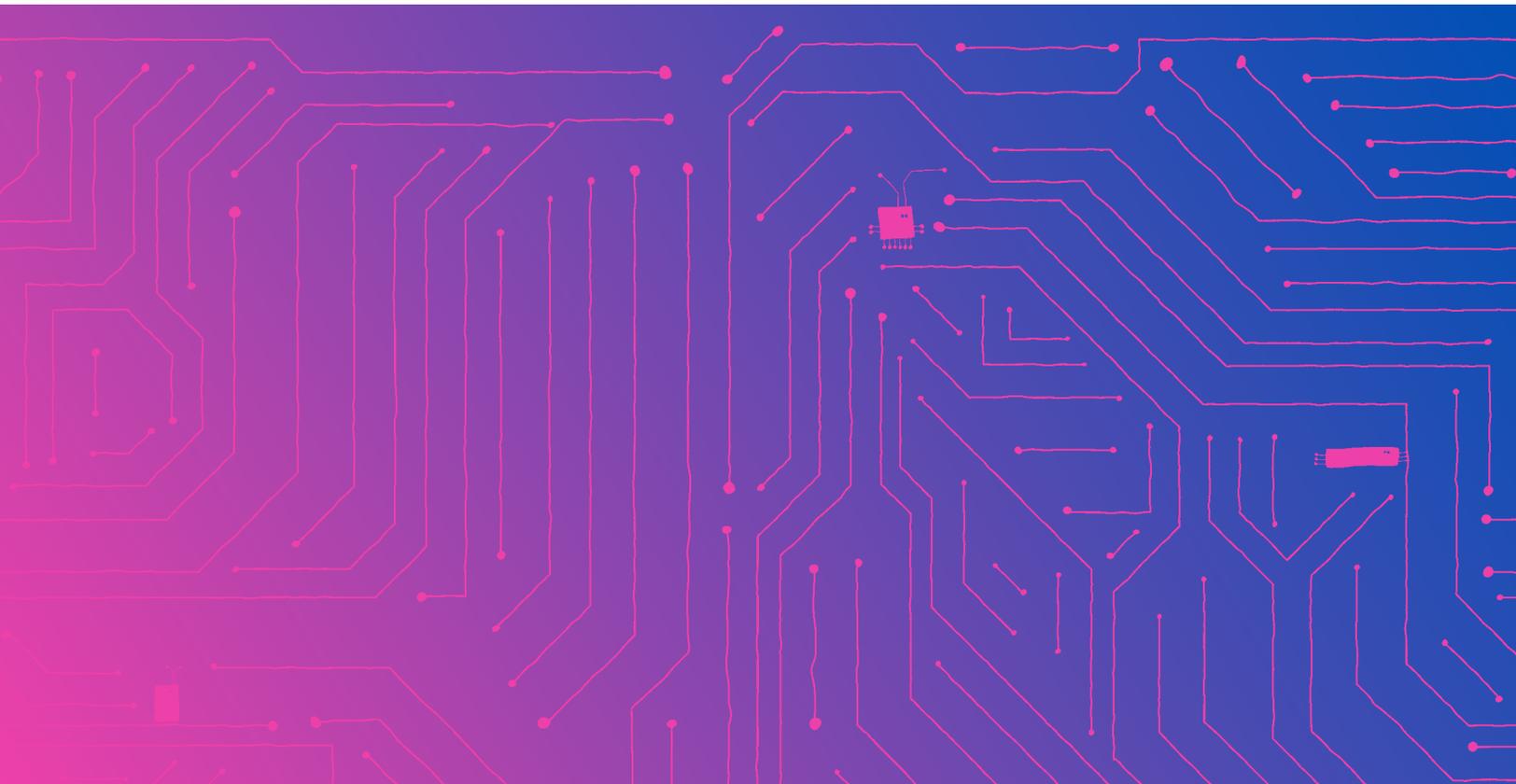
The Center then collaborated with [The GIANT Room](#), a creative co-design lab that provides STEM opportunities for children, to conduct nine co-design sessions in four US communities in May and June 2025—Columbia and Ashland, Missouri, New York City, and Tulsa, Oklahoma. These communities were selected to help us hear from a mix of voices—urban, suburban, and rural, from different parts of the country, with different backgrounds. We recruited families with the New York City and Tulsa YMCAs; the Columbia, Missouri Boys and Girls Club; New York-based after school robotics non-profit Robofun; The GIANT Room; and local contacts through our personal and Sesame Workshop networks—starting with local educators and moving to broader local listservs and community email lists. Sessions were held in libraries, community centers, and YMCAs. The content of the sessions was captured by photos, audio and video recordings, and notes from each facilitator, all of which were analyzed to produce this report.

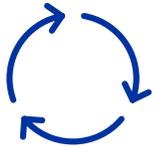
We spoke with 41 parents and guardians, as well as two grandparents, and 53 children who ranged in age from 5-14. Though the project officially recruited children ages 8-12, some families brought additional siblings, who were incorporated into the sessions. One high school senior sibling was incorporated into the parent/caregiver session in Ashland, Missouri.

After a full-group warm up, kids and parents were divided into separate groups. Kids engaged in iterative co-designing, first using craft materials to build their dream phone, and then working to design a “safety toolkit” of features—both inside and outside the phone—to support healthy and safe use. Kids were also prompted to develop ideas for other children struggling with specific scenarios around disengaging from screens, encountering unwanted content, and mean peer behavior. In their session, parents chose specific digital parenting challenges that other parents had shared for an activity in which they designed tools, materials, curricula, technologies, laws, exams and a myriad of other items and interventions to try to address or support parents and kids with that challenge. Parents then shared their designs for feedback from other parents.



Two parents share stories in Tulsa





The Technology Parenting Cycle

Two central ideas emerged from these sessions. First, that **all families are on a tech parenting journey**, from the moment their first child arrives. And second, that within that journey is a season-like **cycle of stages of decisions and tech management** that repeat as families grow together.

Fundamentally, all families are on the long journey of raising their children to adulthood. Making choices around the inclusion of devices, platforms, and content is a steep part of that path, but also one that begins quite early—in the toddler years or earlier, with decisions about video watching and phone “pass-back²” to young children.

Tech use begins for most children in their toddler or pre-school years, and exposure to content can happen even earlier, especially for kids with older siblings in the same home. Fully 75% of children ages 0-8 have a tablet in the home; more than 95% have a smartphone

and a TV in the household.³ By the time most children enter kindergarten, parents have already had many conversations, made decisions, and enforced rules about their kids’ use and access to media and tech.

Kids at this stage want to know how to show their parents that they are ready.

Our research suggests this path is actually a repeating cycle, one that builds on itself and the experiences families gain in navigating the use of all types of media and technology. Through our conversations with kids and parents, our team identified three separate stages that flow into one another, repeating with different devices and tools at different ages and stages of maturity.

² Chiong, C., & Shuler, C. (2010). *Learning: Is there an app for that? Investigations of young children’s usage and learning with mobile devices and apps*. New York: The Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop. p. 9.

³ Mann, S., Calvin, A., Lenhart, A., and Robb, M.B. (2025). *The Common Sense census: Media use by kids zero to eight, 2025*. San Francisco, CA: Common Sense Media.

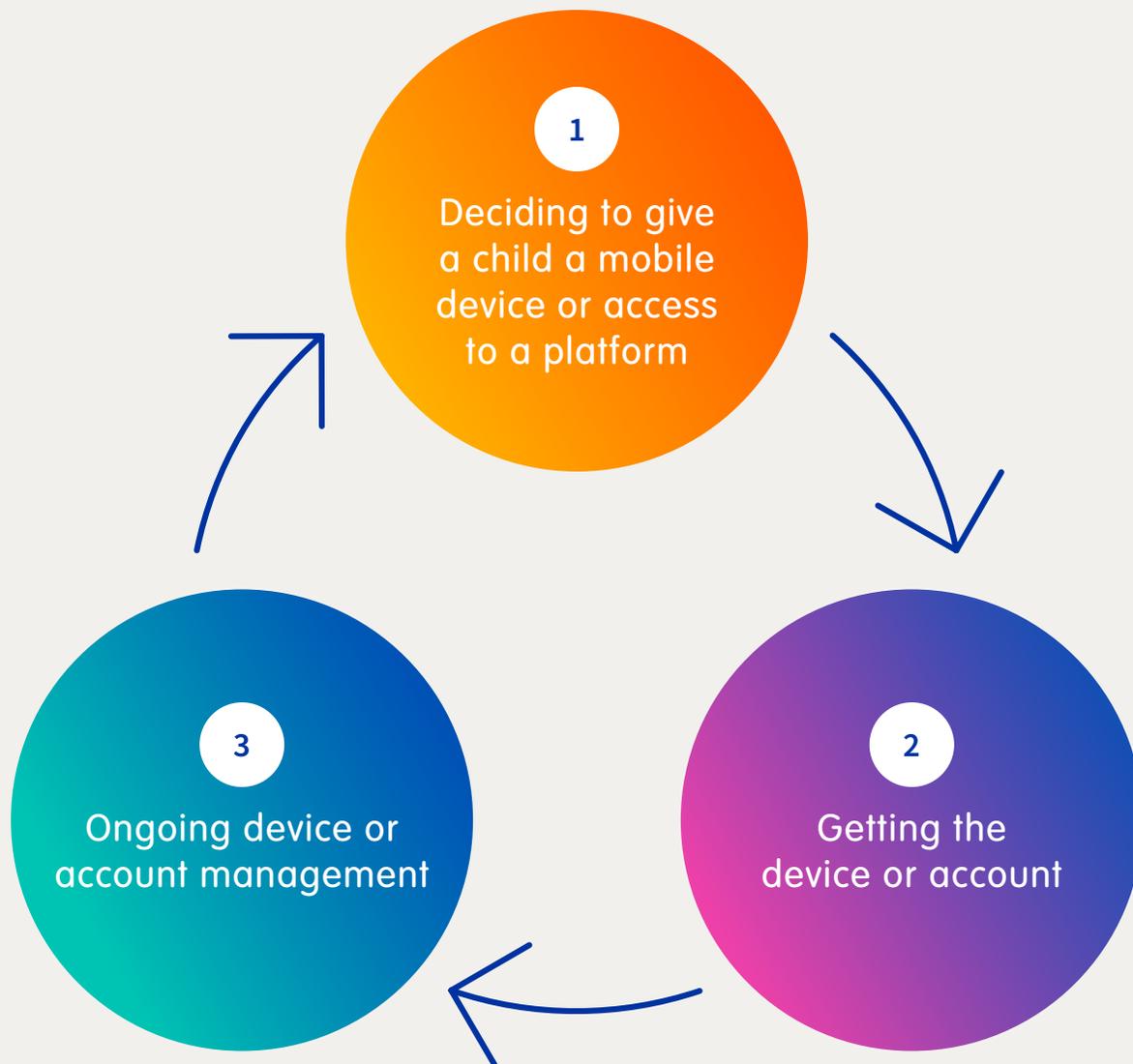
Tech Parenting Cycle Stages

- 1 Deciding to give a child a mobile device or access to a platform
- 2 Getting the device or account
- 3 Ongoing device or account management

Each of these stages is animated by different motivations and concerns for parents and kids, and different families are all at different points along the path. Even if two families have children the same age, they may not be at the same spot along the cycle, depending on a variety of factors like family size, parenting style, economic situation, and familiarity with technology tools.

Let's examine each stage within the tech parenting cycle.

THE TECHNOLOGY PARENTING CYCLE



1

Deciding to Give a Child Access to a Mobile Device or Platform

In this stage, something has begun to push parents toward thinking that a new device or account might be right for their child. While we often focus on the moment when families are choosing a personal mobile device for a child, this decision point applies to many moments beyond selecting a phone. It could be the choice to get the child their own tablet, the choice to allow them to use the family console gaming system, the choice to buy them a smartwatch, or to allow them to sign up for a social media platform like Instagram. In our sessions, given the age of the children, most of our conversations were most often focused on giving a child access to a phone, though some families were also thinking about how and when to introduce smartwatches or social media platforms.

For the families considering a phone, there were a number of reasons why they were considering getting a personal mobile device for their child. Some believed that kids of a particular age should have greater physical independence, like biking to school or walking to a friend's home. When combined with concerns about their safety and a desire for both parent and child to be reachable in an emergency, parents looked to phones to connect them. For some families, the pressure comes from activities like sports or other extracurriculars, which often operate under the assumption that youth participants have easy access to a device to call parents for a pick up, to view a video in preparation for a rehearsal, or to create videos for sports or modeling scouts. For other families, the pressure comes from the kids themselves, who are craving freedom, entertainment, and social connection with friends; or from parents themselves, worrying that not having a phone might harm their kids' social life with friends by keeping them out of the loop of conversations and plans.

For parents in this decision-making phase, the big question is about assessing readiness for a device. Parents may wonder how they can know that their particular child is ready for the responsibility, freedom, and access that a device offers, or what kind of device their child is ready for—a calling-enabled smartwatch? A basic phone without apps or a touch screen? A smartphone? We spoke with parents who wondered how to start the process of ensuring that their child has an adequate grounding in digital literacy in order to use a new device in ways that are healthy and beneficial to them.

Kids at this stage want to know how to show their parents that they are ready. Kids see this moment as a way to enhance their independence, but also as an opportunity to partner with parents to keep themselves safe.



Sharing phone design and features in Missouri

During our co-design conversations, parents and kids described many of these key challenges throughout the cycle. We asked both parents and kids to brainstorm new ideas to solve the problems they felt were most personally relevant, or where they felt they had ideas to share. For this first phase of the tech parenting cycle, kids and parents suggested creating visible ways to demonstrate child-readiness, and wanted age- and family-appropriate options for tools that would address challenges around evaluating a child's readiness for a device or platform. Suggestions for such tools included ideas like a game-style health meter showing a child's progress in areas of maturity and self-management, or a flow chart that families could follow (and return to) with possible paths for device acquisition for watches, tablets, and phones.

Want more detail about the ideas that kids and parents shared for this or the following stages of the technology parenting cycle? See [Appendix A](#) for a full list, description and some images of the ideas parents and kids shared.



Designing phone features in New York

2

Getting the Device or Account

Once parents have selected and purchased a device, many report that the unboxing and set up process—especially for smartphones—is difficult and exhausting. This phase is marked by family conversations (and eventually agreements) about expectations around behavior and use of the device or app, and consequences for breaking those rules. Beyond establishing and documenting expectations about how the technology will be used, parents want to ensure that their children have a baseline of digital literacy as they start to explore the new spaces and places, both physical and digital, unlocked by the new device. It's no longer just about a kid showing readiness and maturity for managing the device; now there is new information to digest, and new norms for a kid to learn.

Parents are also concerned about the privacy of their child and their family, and how platforms collect data—data that is used to customize user experiences, as well as to monetize a child's experiences online or even to track a child's location.

Parents also want to ensure that the use of these personal mobile devices is balanced with time for physical, tactile, and otherwise offline activities like playing musical instruments, other types of creating, or physical outdoor play.

In our conversations, many kids told us that they feel strongly that the rules they must follow should be fair and aligned with rules their parents must follow as well (e.g., no one in the family can use their phone at the dinner table). Kids also told us that they want tools (on the phone or separate from it) that help manage unwanted content exposure, corporate collection of their data, and other risks. They are excited for the ways a phone can help them balance more independence with safety through continued connection to caregivers.

For this second stage of the tech parenting cycle, parents and kids brainstormed ideas for more modular family technology use agreements, which could better capture agreement needs for different types of devices, as well as unique family concerns as parents completed new device setup. Both parents and children expressed a desire for devices that are designed differently than current models, and for apps and settings that use kid-friendly language and default to age-appropriate settings—with options to unlock features that allow more freedom as a child grows more mature.

3

Ongoing Device or Account Management

After a family has acquired and set up a device, the child, the parent, and the tool all continue to evolve. Children gain maturity, parents gain insight, and tools can add new features or functionality. All of this change must be managed. For younger children who do not yet have a personal mobile device, the biggest challenges at this stage tend to be around screen time, which can include gaming, watching video content, listening to music or stories, and using creative apps for coding, making art or music; all mostly occurring on tablets, but also on other household devices like TV, game consoles, and laptops. As kids get older, the variety and mobility of apps, games, and devices increases, upping the complexity of technology management. At the same time, kids want more privacy and freedom.

Designers have an immediate opportunity to make families' lives easier—especially during unboxing and onboarding.

In this phase, parents and kids face two major challenges that re-occur as each new device and account are added. First, parents must figure out how to speak with their kids about appropriate use to ensure that their digital literacy evolves as they grow; second, parents and kids must learn how to find the balance between screen time and non-screen time, with parents especially encouraging creative hands-on activities and outdoor play.

Ideas shared by kids and parents for this stage included conversation starters—like card decks, prompts, and games—and DIY crafts, as well as more technical options like digital indicators of time left on an app or a screen, or digital literacy curricula. The craft concepts provided opportunities for families to participate in a fun activity together, while also inspiring conversations about balancing screen and non-screen time, a key concern of many parents in our sessions. Suggestions included making a spinner for kids with screen-free activities to do before or instead of screen-based play, or ideas for blending screens and outdoor play, like taking a phone or digital camera out for a photo scavenger hunt in the community or a nearby park.



Child shows her screen time indicator



What We Learned

Outside of the technology parenting cycle, we uncovered overarching themes that touched on many aspects of a family's use of technology in their lives. Overall, we heard that families crave more support across all parts of their tech journey—support for the decisions and constant work of navigating new devices and platforms and the ongoing use of digital tools and media. Other challenges families face are a part of the broader context around families and their choices about technology. Parents are managing their own broader family system, friends and neighbors, schools, after school activities, and other institutions, all of which can be sources of messaging about whether and when to give devices to their kids, and how best to manage them.

Kids are also navigating the differences between their own family's choices and the approaches of their schools, as well as their peers and families. Most kids are open to some restrictions on their use of devices, games, and platforms, but they want to be involved in the decision-making process and to have the rules acknowledge their own fears and social relationship impacts, as well as be fairly applied across adults and kids in the family. Some parents have greater challenges—particularly lower income families and families with neurodiverse children—and these families would benefit from more resources tailored to their particular needs.

Below we detail these high-level themes that cross all stages of a family's technology journey—first from parents, then from kids.

Parents are overwhelmed by managing tech, feel forced into acquiring it, and are navigating both family-level and community-level variations in readiness, expectations, and approaches.

- + **Parents are exhausted.** All solutions should be about making this easier for parents.
- + **Parents sometimes have to parent around tech in a broader family system with grandparents, co-parents, and extended family—sometimes even when they don't want to.** Parents crave resources to help them get all caregivers on the same page and to keep them up-to-date with the evolution of the primary caregiver's choices and positions around tech use.

- + **Parents also feel forced by circumstances** to give their kids mobile devices when they don't feel that they or their child are ready.
- + **Older and younger kids are at different developmental stages and require different approaches.** For example, playful content can bring younger kids into conversation when it is designed well. Older kids' relationships with their parents or caregivers are also evolving, requiring different conversation styles and approaches, including acknowledging growing autonomy and age-appropriate desires for privacy and transparency from parents.
- + **There are some parents who are less concerned and more confident** than the typical parent. These parents still want resources, but do not need to be addressed as though they are afraid.
- + **Free and low-cost options—whether for non-digital activities or monitoring tools—are extremely important to middle and lower-income parents,** and they resent the constant monetization of the things they need to keep their kids safe.

Kids want to balance safety and security with personal autonomy and self-regulation, and crave familial and technological transparency about why rules are in place.

- + As we learned in our sessions, **keeping interactions and learning moments between parents and kids playful and positive** enhances learning, bolsters child buy-in, and supports the caregiver-child relationship. Kids in particular asked for positive reinforcement from parents, including praise and rewards.
- + **Safety shouldn't depend entirely on parents** remembering to change every setting. Parents shared that settings are hard to manage, with requirements and differences specific to each app or site, and parents don't always know the risks well enough to know they need to change a setting. Kids wanted safety built into apps and devices by design to take the burden off kids and parents to police and micromanage their child's tech use.
- + **Kids want to be safe, but also have their privacy.** Children expressed a strong desire for emergency features, age-appropriate content, and parental guidance and collaboration, while also asking for private spaces within their digital lives (especially kids nine years and older). Their ideas reflect a need for both protection and personal agency.
- + **Clear boundaries are welcomed when they're fair.** Kids support consistent rules—like no phones during meals or automatic shut-off at night—especially when those rules apply equally to adults. Fairness and transparency matter.



New York parents sharing ideas

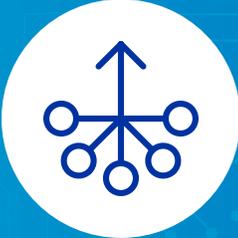
- + **Parental controls or limits should explain “why?”** Kids want to know the reasons behind particular restrictions to help them understand the decisions being made. Decisions that seem arbitrary to kids cause frustration.
- + **Tools that support self-regulation have value.** From limiting game downloads to creating custom “clean” app experiences, kids demonstrated an awareness of self-regulation, and expressed a desire for tools that would help them make thoughtful decisions about screen time.
- + **Readiness should be earned, not assumed by age alone.** Kids challenged the idea of fixed-age thresholds, favoring personalized readiness assessments based on behavior and responsibility.
- + **Kids are mindful of how tech boundaries impact peer relationships.** Kids wanted messages and tools to explain absences and abrupt departures (especially from networked games). They want support from their tools to maintain friendships and social connections while sticking to screen limits.
- + **Many younger children worry about being exposed to scary content** that they do not want to see, and are hungry for ways to block, blur, or limit content they find frightening or disturbing—with the help of either a parent or AI. They want filters to be customizable for specific fears (i.e. snakes, blood). This is a strong opportunity for building digital literacy skills both to teach kids strategies for getting support from adults after viewing upsetting content; as well as teaching adults how to support kids through these experiences.
- + **Kids wanted more accessible features on their phones.** They want visual notifications that are easy to understand and interpret (instead of text-based notifications with abstract visuals that can cause confusion), easy to access contacts, and family-friendly app features that are straightforward to use.

Parents are exhausted and need more support, and are looking to designers to build better, cheaper, and more effective tools and products to both improve and introduce more joy into their tech parenting journeys. Parents are navigating differences across families', communities', and institutions' expectations for kids' connectivity, which are not always aligned with their values or their child's developmental stage.

Kids between 7 and 12 are taking bigger steps toward independence, but still want the safety net of the family underneath them. They want more kid-friendly language, experiences, explanations, and protections from scary or inappropriate content. This is especially true of younger children (ages 7-9). They want to be able to show what they're ready for and to have opportunities to learn self-regulation and tools for gracious exits from online conversations and group play. Kids, like their parents, see the burden being placed on the adults in their family and want to see more support for caregivers in their work towards ensuring positive, fun, and safe experiences for kids online.

Designers have a clear opportunity to innovate and develop new features, products, and tools that will help families address a clear set of pain points around kids and technology, and have a chance to bring fun, joy, and connection to families at every step on their technology parenting journey.

Thoughtful design has the power to strengthen family relationships rather than strain them.



Recommendations for Designers and Product Managers

Designers have an immediate opportunity to make families' lives easier, especially during unboxing, onboarding, and early device use. Ensuring that designs and products are tightly calibrated to the age and developmental stage of the child users is critical.

Unboxing and default settings

- + Create a dedicated onboarding process or unboxing flow for new apps, platforms, or devices, especially smartphones, tiered by age or stage of development. This could include detailed set up instructions, links to find more information on settings, playful time-limit content, and digital literacy educational materials and videos for kids and families.
- + Make apps age-accessible with plain explanatory language and safety settings on by default—private profiles, location data off, and data privacy for younger users.
- + Don't monetize child safety features or parent controls.



Kids co-design in Missouri

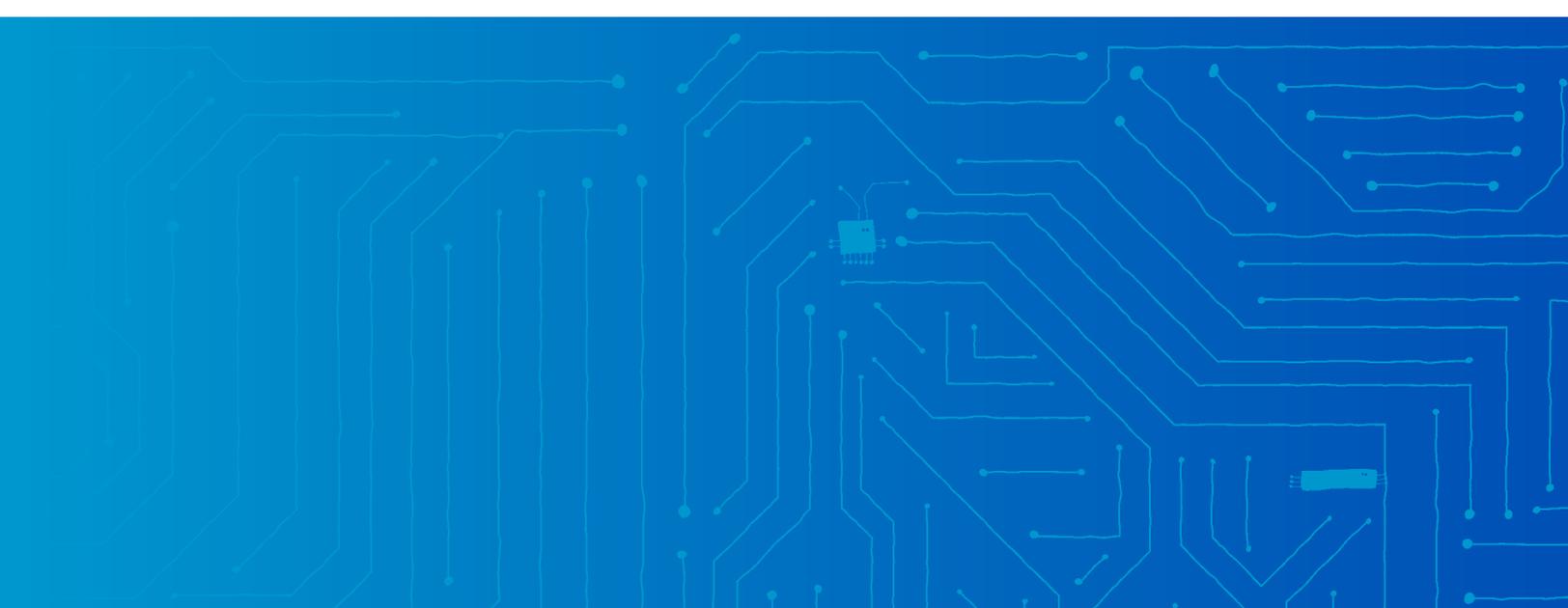
Digital literacy and readiness tools

- + Create tools that allow families to document online or in-person behaviors that signal readiness for new features, apps, or devices. These could be in the form of a flow chart, quiz, or health meter to help families determine and kids to demonstrate readiness for different digital devices, including tablets, watches, feature phones, smartphones, social media platforms, and AI systems.
- + Give children the opportunity to learn to self-regulate with their tech, and earn new privileges and features. Built-in screentime meters that show time left/time spent at a glance could be helpful at the app or even device level.
- + Support ongoing literacy development and conversations by creating playful digital literacy content, such as a *Would You Rather?* card deck or anime-inspired narrative content.
- + Develop a curriculum, banded by age, that teaches kids the skills needed to use increasingly sophisticated and complicated devices, apps, and platforms. Ensure that the curriculum documents and shares a child's knowledge to help parents assess readiness.

Families want the technology parenting journey to feel like guidance toward digital adulthood—not a tiring slog.

Kid-friendly form factors and experiences

- + Create more technical and hardware offerings for families—including new phone form factors, simplified software modes, kid-oriented operating systems, and easier paths to throttling back the functions of phones and then gradually unlocking them as kids age and grow.
- + Acknowledge the social challenges that screen time limits present to kids playing or talking online with friends, and design features that allow them a gracious rather than abrupt exit.
- + Use filters and AI to help kids have the choice to shield themselves from unwanted, traumatizing content.





Conclusion

Over the course of our conversations with families for this work, we heard repeatedly about the common concerns and strain that parents face. We heard how kids and parents want help optimizing their digital experiences for joy, family connectedness, balance and safety. Families want the through-line of the technology parenting cycle to feel like an exciting part of guiding a child to digital adulthood, rather than the tiring slog that so many parents currently experience.

And while technology companies may not consider children and family dynamics first when designing their products, we argue that there are great opportunities for products—whether devices or apps—to win over lifelong customers through thoughtful design decisions. Make devices and platforms more age-adjustable, with tools and features that both streamline experiences for parents, and offer tools for kids and parents to customize what their devices do and allow, control how their data is used, and ensure that kids have the digital literacy to be safe and savvy users. Thoughtful design will build loyal and appreciative families.

In a world where technology has infiltrated every aspect of family life, listening to children and parents gives us the tools to better understand their needs, and their day-to-day experiences creating, and then navigating, their family's technology environment. Now, it is up to us to go and design devices, policies, and practices for them.



Appendices

Appendix A

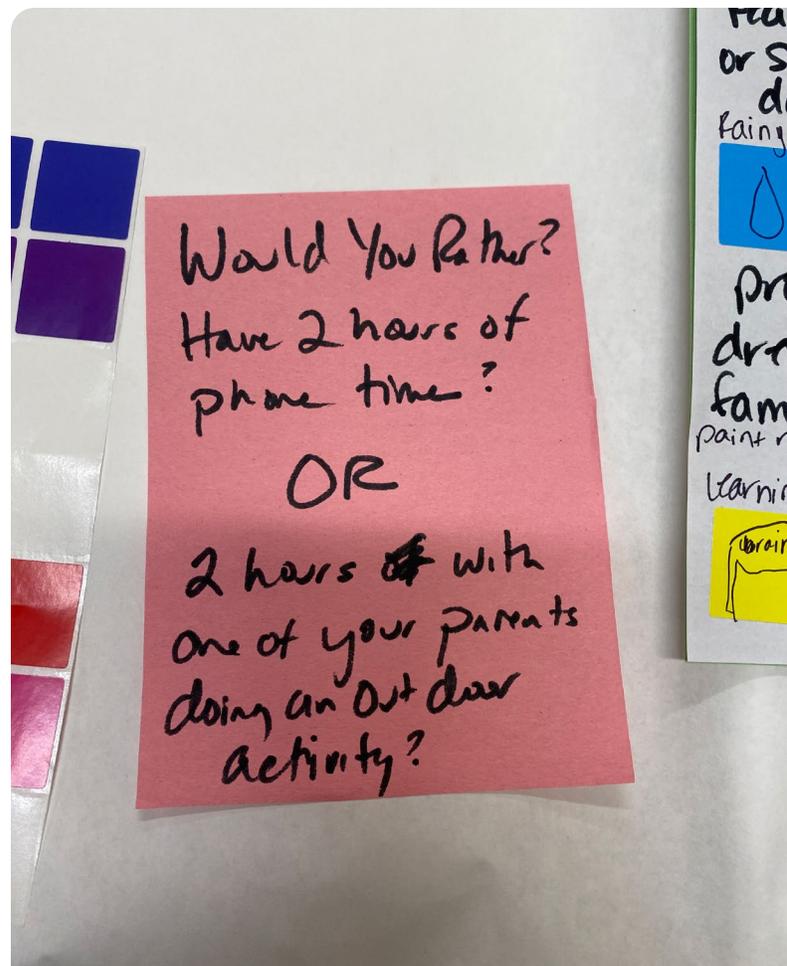
Parent and Kid Ideas for Tools, Products, and Content to Support the Digital Parenting Journey

In our co-design sessions, kids and parents brainstormed a large number of ideas for materials, tools, or products that would help address specific challenges families face in acquiring, setting up, or managing new devices and platforms. We have organized their ideas by the stage of the technology parenting cycle where a particular challenge occurs, and the particular problem within that stage that the solution addresses, and offer links to some existing resources when available.

Parent and Kid Ideas | Technology Parenting Cycle—Stage I: Deciding to get a mobile device or platform

How to talk to kids about appropriate use and ensure digital literacy

Parents want to ensure that their children have the tools to engage with new digital tools and platforms safely, kindly and responsibly. But often they do not know where to start or how to integrate these conversations into their busy lives.



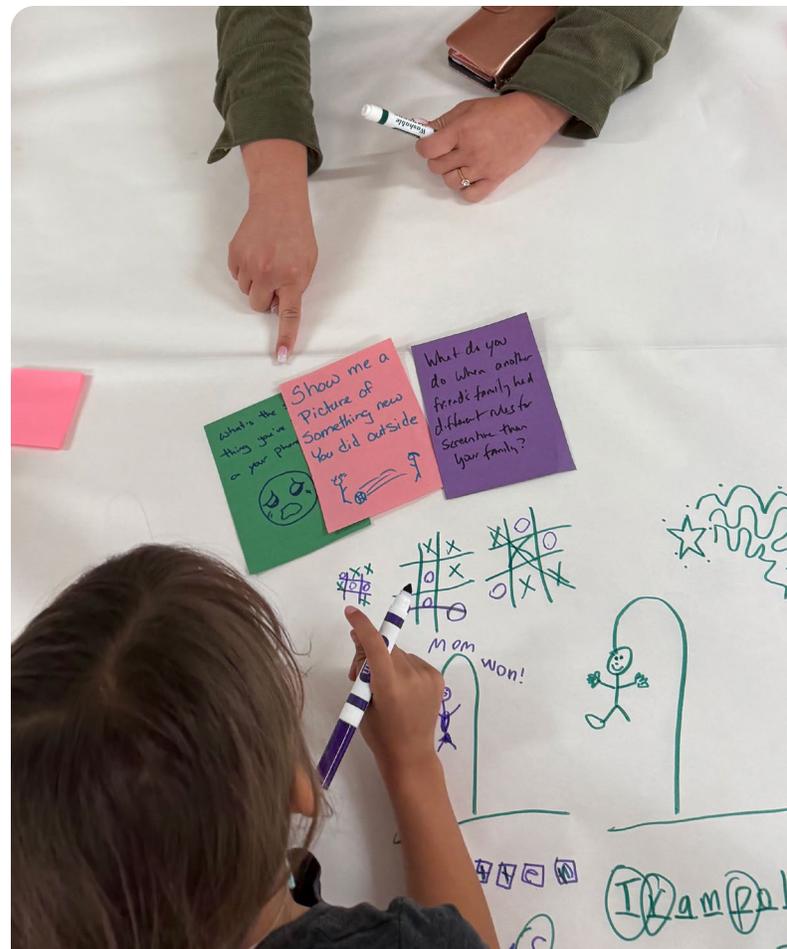
Would You Rather? card example

Conversation inspiration

These mostly-analog solutions lay the groundwork for ongoing and open kid-caregiver dialogue around digital literacy and appropriate device use. Kids were more responsive to conversations that started from a positive position, rather than a “No X” or “Don’t Y” perspective. A number of kids suggested that these solutions could also be digital to keep them from getting lost.

- + **Would You Rather? card deck.** These cards, often designed by children themselves, pose silly contrasting questions for children and adults to answer. Questions should be designed to spark conversation about the purpose, importance, and use of digital technologies. Two examples include a card that asks “Would you rather never play your favorite game again or play the game 24/7 and do nothing else?” or “Would you rather give up your phone for a year or never eat pizza again?” *See an example from [the GIANT Room](#).*
- + **Dinner Table Question Prompts card deck.** This deck includes a mix of questions that prompt reflection, offering scenarios or conversation starters. These types of questions were particularly well received by parents, as they built parent and child awareness of certain online risks and created an open communication channel between parents and kids. *See an example from [Digital Promise](#).*
- + **Board Game** that allows the players to advance based on correctly answering questions demonstrating digital literacy.
- + **Poster** with “20 Questions to Ask Your Kids about their Social Media Use/Tech Use”
- + **Conversation prompts** and flows, including questions for parents to ask themselves when confronted with a tech parenting challenge. These kinds of prompts create space for parents to think of a solution, consider an alternate solution, and think through potential unintended consequences. *See an [example from Verizon](#).*

In some families, kids shared that they are not that comfortable talking, or that they don’t like talking. Many of them were still interested in having “communication channels” with their parents as another way to stay connected. These kids liked the idea of the Would You Rather or Prompt type questions, but expressed a desire to respond by drawing, building things, and acting instead of just talking. Some parents also preferred to have a mix of expression modes available to keep things more engaging.



Parent and child drawing their responses to Would You Rather? cards

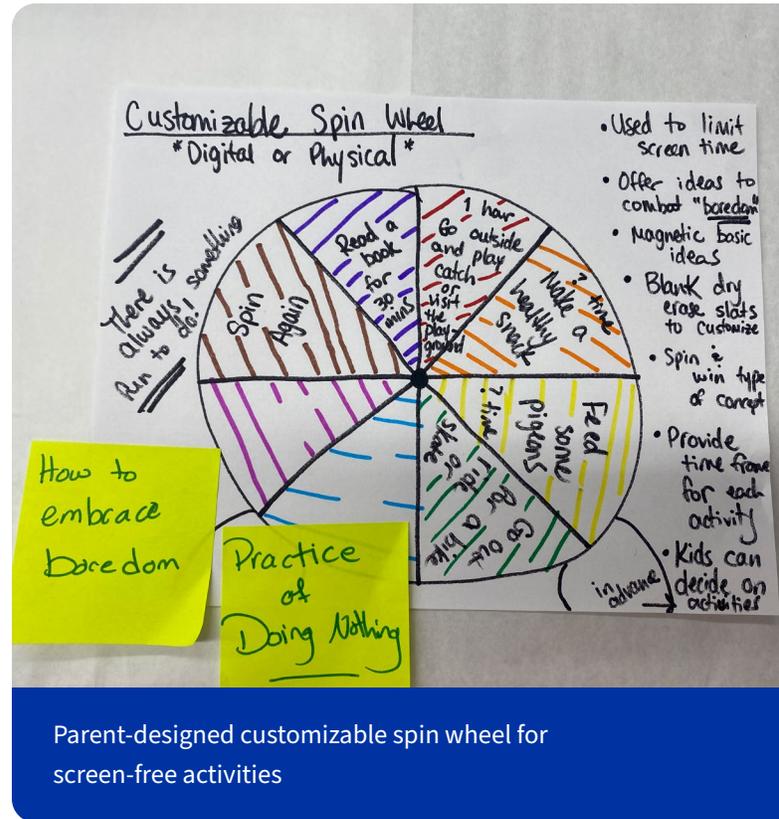
Find balance between screens and non-screen time, especially outdoor play

The idea of balance was especially important for families, who wanted to make sure their children didn't lose time outdoors or neglect other forms of physical, creative play and time with family in pursuit of screentime. Parents wanted automatic reminders to free them from nagging and conflict, and kid-friendly ways to inspire new forms of play and support kids as they learn self-regulation. Kids keenly felt the social challenges of the abrupt end of their screen time when it involved playing with other people. They wanted visual representations of the screen time left to them by app or device, and grace periods or automatic messages that helped them exit games and chats gracefully when their time was up.

Kids and parents were very enthusiastic about solving issues of balance between screen time and other types of activities and play, and shared a variety of ideas and recommendations, including:

DIY tools to help with balance and boredom

- + **Choice Deck or Choice Spinner.** A deck of cards or customizable spin wheel, each with different activities that the kids or family could engage in. Includes reading, outdoor play, family activities, creative activities, chores, sports, and more. Could be used instead of screen time or as things to do before screen time begins.
- + **Creative Idea Box.** A box full of ideas and prompts that kids could pull out and do. This could be positioned near craft or art materials to provide an easy alternative to the phone when boredom strikes.
- + **Before You Scroll Checklist.** A checklist poster for the fridge, including movement, a chore, reading, helping a family member or friend—all of which should be completed before screentime begins.
- + **Instead of _____, Try _____.** This approach aims to offer alternative ideas for things to do instead of screen time. Designed as a poster or graphic to help young people redirect away from problematic behavior to something more positive or well-being enhancing.



Parent-designed customizable spin wheel for screen-free activities

Space rules

- + **No Phone Zones at home.** Create a customizable map template and guidance that encourages a family conversation and establishes areas in the house where family members agree not to use their phones (dinner table, living room, bedroom, etc.) and locations where it's ok to use them (kitchen, for example). Kids suggested these rules must apply to both parents and children. Many parents acknowledged that it might be challenging for themselves to adhere to these rules themselves.
- + **No Phone Zone app.** An app that tracks where you are in the house and allots a certain amount of screen time for that room - (e.g. 30 minutes in the living room, 12 minutes in the bedroom, 0 minutes in the bathroom.)

Technical suggestions: Pop-ups, apps, and limits

- + **A pop-up on a phone or device before screen time begins.** The pop-up asks “Are You Ready for Screen Time? Have you...?” and includes a list of items that need to be completed before screen time will be granted. Kids shared that these pop-ups need to be visual, funny, and ideally use a mix of comic and short videos.
- + Complete a **math quiz to unlock the phone.**
- + **“Boredom Buster”** app. This app uses zip code or location to connect families to free or cheap local, in-person activities. The app offers suggestions for activities for families that are low or no-cost and could be done alone, in groups, or as a family (suggestions include everything from making cookies or playing Kick the Can to information about a free street festival in a nearby town or neighborhood.)

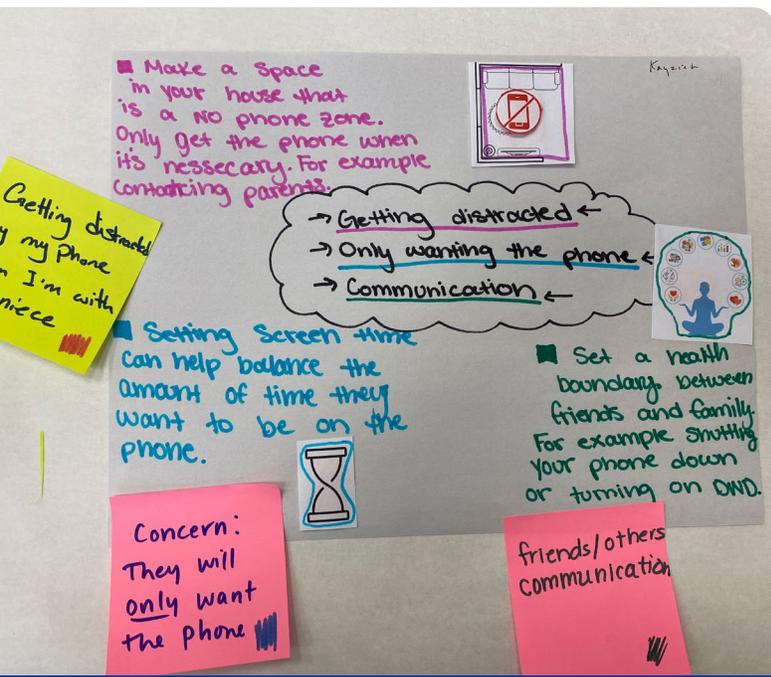
“Extension” apps that connect people to each other and/or outdoor play

- + **A photo scavenger hunt**—A kid or a family uses a phone to find and document landmarks, animals, clues, and more, all outside. *See an example from The Global Wizards.*
- + **Local hike that is gamified by geo-located challenges** or experiences.
- + **“Do Together” app.** Create, read, and watch with far-flung family and friends.
- + **A creativity app** that layers outdoor art experiences, documents them, and allows for digital modification and sharing across family and friends for a collaborative art project. *See an example from OctoStudio.*

Flexible and fun screen time management

We found that kids are open to screen time restrictions when they are transparent, fun, and flexible. Some of their ideas for screen time management included:

- + **“Time Left” indicators** that show amount of screen time left, by device and by app
- + **An extra time bank** to allow for graceful exits from games and chats
- + **Pre-set, kid-appropriate departure messages** to help kids manage the end of screen time in networked games or chats
- + **Fridge screen time clock** that sets time blocks throughout the day when phones or screens or game systems are allowed, have to be requested, or are not allowed (e.g., ok to use from 7:45 to 8:15am if ready to leave the house for school, ask to use after 9pm, not ok to use after 10pm).
- + **Only 5:** Can only have five games on device, and you must swap an old one out before you can add a new one.
- + **+5/-5 cards:** Kids suggested that if parents catch them doing something good (or bad) they can add or deduct five minutes from their daily screen time totals.



Tactics from a Missouri parent for managing phones with sticky note prompts

**Parent and Kid Ideas | Technology Parenting Cycle—
Stage 2: Getting the device**

How do I know my child is ready? And what device are they ready for?

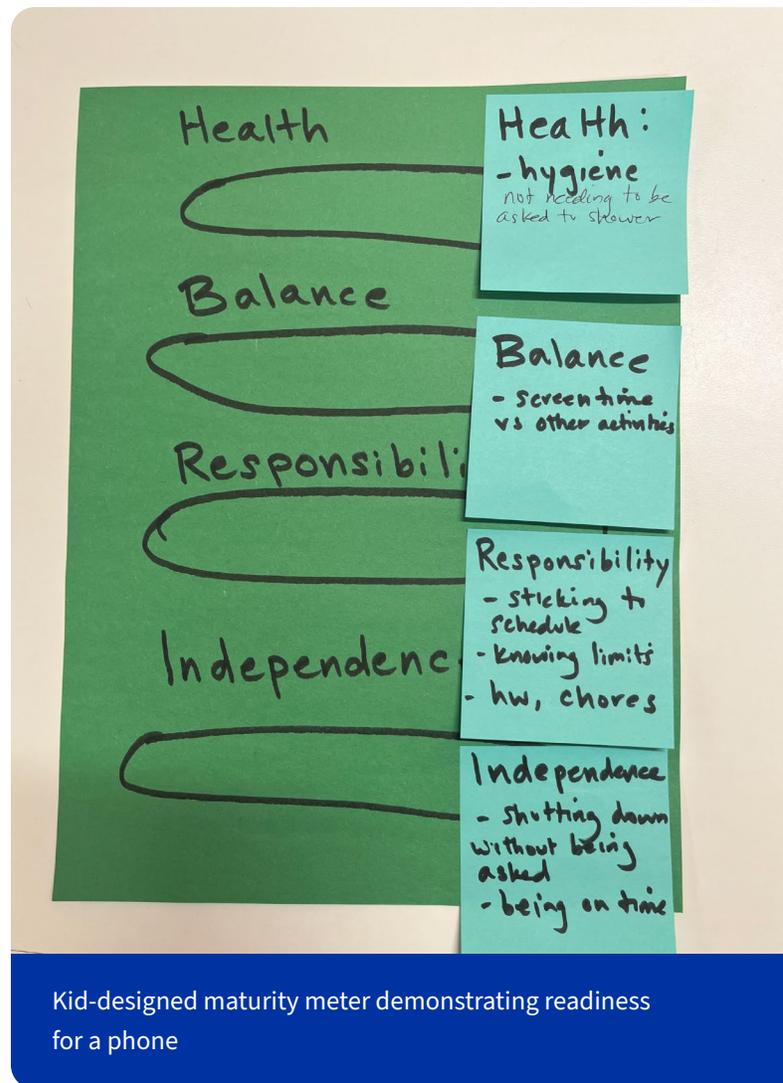
Parents and kids want to know—when is a particular child or family ready for a mobile phone, tablet, smart watch, or social media? Both parents and kids wanted concrete behaviors they could assess that would help determine if a child is ready for a particular device or platform. Parents welcomed the chance to visualize different options for devices to meet particular needs in the current moment.

Phone readiness assessments

- + **A flow chart for decision-making** that covers the major reasons why families might acquire a phone or other device for a child (safety, social exclusion, external pressure from teams/groups and their logistics) and their device and setting options, as well as readiness cues (e.g., does your child send text messages? Do they use the tool responsibly? Can they keep their possessions without losing or breaking them? Can they manage their time wisely?) Parents noted the power in the visibility of options and choices in the flow chart.
- + **A “Choose Your Own Adventure”**—where families can make decisions/choices and get to recommendations or outcomes, but also go back and follow different paths, either as they mull their device or platform options, or later, once a choice isn’t working or they’re ready for the next step.
- + **A quiz** that allows parents to run through a series of questions and get a set of recommendations for devices, settings, and approaches.
- + **Maturity and responsibility health meters: Gamified system for demonstrating phone readiness or responsible use.** Similar to health meters, or XP in games, these displays could be physical or digital and would hang up in the home. These tools allow parents and kids to have a shared understanding of what each meter means and what kids need to do to demonstrate growth in each area. The emphasis is on

kids demonstrating consistent growth and on co-creating and co-managing the documentation of behaviors. Meter categories could include:

- **Health** (making healthy choices, hygiene/taking care of your body),
- **Balance** (time on screen/time off screen, going outside, exercising, etc.)
- **Responsibility** (making good choices, taking care of belongings, handling tricky situations)
- **Time Management** (getting homework done, shutting down at agreed upon times if they already have a device or in other similar circumstances, like TV or tablet).



Kid-designed maturity meter demonstrating readiness for a phone

Ensuring sufficient digital literacy

Families want easy-to-understand, playful, and engaging materials that help kids and parents learn about appropriate, safe, and responsible uses of platforms and devices.

Tools, apps, and literacy curricula for families that help teach kids about digital challenges in a playful, age-appropriate way

- + **Curricula:** Parents want curricula with modules that children must complete (possibly passing a quiz) before they can get their first phone, or unlock new types of apps (e.g., in order to use a financial app like Venmo, a child might need to take and pass a module on financial data, scams, and safety). Different curricula would be aimed at different aged kids, and modules of each curriculum could be attached to the acquisition of different devices, starting with a smartwatch and eventually graduating to a social media account.
- + **Comics or anime** that share stories teaching about challenges with technology (like seeing scary content, or cyberbullying). Some kids thought that sharing comics, anime, or short graphic novel content would package helpful lessons and themes in an appealing way.

Other notifications could also be animated and include messages or reminders (time for bed!) delivered by animated kids or an avatar that looks like you or a favorite character. Kids shared that they wanted notifications and pop-ups to be more kid-friendly, with less text and more easy-to-understand graphics.

+ Exams or licensing

- Many of the parents we spoke to expressed a desire for a **digital literacy exam** a child must pass before getting a smartphone
- **A smart phone license**, similar to a driver's license, certifying that young people are trained and ready to use the phone safely and well.

+ **Pamphlets or workbooks**—paper-based materials families can take home and read and/or review and complete with their child, which lay out expectations and focus on helping parents co-play, co-view, and engage with their child around technology and screen time.

+ **Pop-ups or notifications that explain clearly how data is collected from a phone** by platforms and companies, and more easy-to-understand (more visual, less text) information about how data is used. Kids requested more information about what is happening behind the scenes on their devices, and asked for more information about how they can protect themselves from data misuse.



A comic idea developed in Canva by participants in Tulsa

Parent and Kid Ideas | Technology Parenting Cycle— Stage 3: Ongoing management of current devices Setting expectations

In addition to opening and setting up the new device, the moment a new device or platform is acquired is also a key moment to discuss and set expectations for use and behavior, documenting those conversations and creating a cadence for continuing the conversation in the future as kids learn and grow. Discussing and documenting consistent and transparent rules, many of which apply to both parents and kids, can be valuable in setting expectations. Kids want to know the reasons behind rules, so providing explanations or reasoning is an important part of this process.

- + **Modular family media contracts.** These digital documents would feature modular contract components that families can mix and match based on their needs, rather than requiring that families start from scratch. More customized than a standard template, these contracts would have example components for smart watches, tablets, phones, social media, gaming devices, etc.
- + Periodic **family check-ins** to discuss changes to family agreements, and additional or rescinded privileges in acknowledgement of growth or problems.

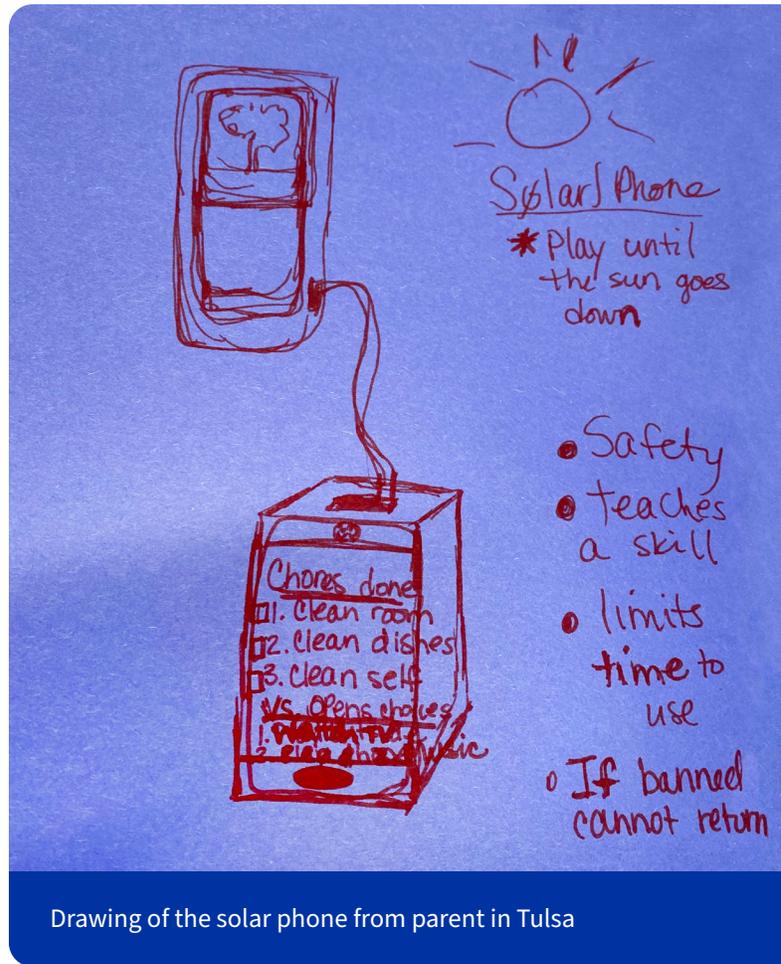
Complex unboxing and set up

According to parents, unboxing a new device—especially a smart phone—is just too hard. Parents and kids brainstormed ideas for new form factors, phone features, settings, and out-of-the-box phone set up to assist families in setting up their new devices quickly and easily.

Make phones kid- and parent-friendly by design

- + **“Smeature Phone”**—A device that is only a smart phone for part of a day. Portions of the phone are always available (calling, texting, maps, music) but games, social media, and more distracting apps are only available for a short period each day.
- + **Grow-along phone** that unlocks new apps as kids grow up and mature. Could be connected to other tools that document readiness and digital literacy like health meters, viewing educational videos, or passing digital knowledge quizzes.
- + **Open-source phone operating system for kids** with no data collection and no ads.
- + **Solar phone:** A phone that works well outside, but must be plugged in within a public space in the home to function inside.
- + **Different limits for different categories of apps**—some apps would be always available, some available until 5pm, and others only usable for 15 minutes a day. The goal would be to simplify set up by setting time limits for broad categories of apps.
- + **No data collected on kids' phones by default.** Both kids and parents are in favor.

- + **The phone should know how old the user is, a.k.a. device-based age assurance.** The phone should know the user’s age, only allow or have age-appropriate apps, and block age-inappropriate content. Kids requested a comprehensive device setting that would block both apps and upsetting or scary content on websites or content shared in other ways (via chat, messages, email, etc).



Drawing of the solar phone from parent in Tulsa

Kids want to feel safe and not be scared online

Safety was a major reason many kids received their first smart watches and smartphones, and it was an aspect of the devices that many kids deeply appreciated. They offered innovative new feature ideas to help keep them connected to family and friends, manage scary situations and content, and block worrisome people or media.

Better, easier safety tools by design and ready access to apps that are kid-appropriate by default

- + **SOS button**—one push to call parents or others for help, easily accessible on the phone.
- + **Speed dial avatars** on front phone screen for one touch calling or texting to caregivers.
- + **Map chat**—allows a caregiver to co-view an online map and chat with the child inside the map app to help them when they are lost.
- + **Password repository**—A child's device password is available to parents in an emergency. Kids suggested this as a way to balance their privacy with safety.
- + **Safe contact list.** A collaboration between parents and kids to establish a known list of contacts for a device. All other messages are blurred or blocked.
- + **Notification and blocking of messages from strangers/people not on a safe list.**
- + **Facial age recognition** for all, which prevents adults from talking to kids in kid-only spaces.
- + **Facial recognition on a child's phone that also allows both parents and kid to unlock** the phone with their face.
- + **Content filters**—AI-enabled tools that filter content by age or keyword. The filter will blur content a user has asked to have blocked (e.g. snakes). Kids don't want to stumble across scary or creepy content, and they don't want to have to see it if one of their friends sends it to them as a joke. Kids felt that AI could be particularly useful in content blocking and filtering.
- + **One touch blocking** of people and the ability to block people across different sites.

Easy-to-find apps are set with kid-friendly settings by default

- + **A kid-appropriate App Store/Playstore** that only has versions of apps preset to be appropriate for kids. (e.g. "Snap Jr."). Users can set their age/their child's age and have the store show only versions of apps appropriate for that age.
- + Kids really wanted **kid-appropriate versions of the most popular** apps that would allow them to use them safely -- apps like SnapChat, TikTok, and YouTube. Kids especially wanted versions of apps that would evolve with them over time.
- + **An algorithm that suggests age-appropriate games** for kids based on age or developmental stage.

Appendix B

Demographics of Parent & Child Co-Design Participants

Adult parents/guardians/caregivers: 43
Children 5-14: 53

(Numbers may not add up to 100 due to rounding. Also note, five adult participants did not take the pre-test or intake survey, and so we do not have quantitative demographic data for them. The sample size is n=37 for demographic data unless otherwise specified. Race data was not collected for child participants, but it should not be assumed that child race matches parent race.)

DEMOGRAPHICS	SAMPLE SIZE	PERCENT OF THE TOTAL SAMPLE
Race of Caregivers & Parents	n=42	
Asian	4	9%
Black	7	17%
Hispanic	4	9%
Native American	2	5%
White	23	55%
Prefer not to say	4	5%
Parent Gender	n=37	
Female	28	76%
Male	8	22%
Non-binary	1	3%
Marital Status	n=37	
Single	11	30%
Married	19	51%
Divorced	4	11%
Living w/ Partner	1	3%
Widowed	2	5%

DEMOGRAPHICS	SAMPLE SIZE	PERCENT OF THE TOTAL SAMPLE
Household Income	n=37	
\$150,000+	7	19%
\$100,000-\$150,000	6	16%
\$75,000-\$100,000	2	5%
\$50,000-\$75,000	6	16%
Under \$50,000	12	32%
Prefer not to say	4	11%
Parent/Caregiver Education	n=38	
Post Grad	16	42%
College Grad	13	34%
Some College	7	18%
High School Grad	1	3%
Trade/Technical School	1	3%
Locale	n=37	
Urban	17	46%
Suburban	12	32%
Small Town	7	19%
Rural	1	3%

CHILD DEMOGRAPHICS	SAMPLE SIZE	PERCENT OF THE TOTAL SAMPLE
Child Age	n=53	
5-7	5	9%
8-9	24	45%
10-11	16	30%
12+	8	15%
Child Gender	n=53	
Girl	30	57%
Boy	22	42%
Non-binary	1	2%

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amanda Lenhart is a senior fellow at the Joan Ganz Cooney Center at the Sesame Workshop and a long-time mixed methods researcher who has spent the bulk of her career studying how children and families use and think about networked technologies.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This work was authored by Amanda Lenhart, Senior Fellow at the Joan Ganz Cooney Center.

Thank you to our colleagues at The GIANT Room who co-produced and led the co-design sessions, and gave feedback on this report: Azadeh Jamalian, Hongjin Du, Aaron Toplin, Astha Sethi, Michelle Rembert, and Maya Hood-Wilson.

Thank you to our Joan Ganz Cooney Center colleagues Sarah Jacobstein, Allisyn Levy, Leslie Berkowitz, Catherine Jhee, Medha Tare, and Michael Preston for all their work on this project.

Thank you to our advisors Hina Talib, Javier Aguera, and Lisa Damour. Special thanks to Lisa for sharing her draft parent decision flow chart with us for refining and testing with parents.

Thank you to the New York City and Greater Tulsa YMCAs, Columbia, Missouri Boys and Girls Club, Robofun, and the GIANT Room for their assistance with this work. Special thanks to Kathryn Colglazier, Crystal Rivera and team at the Westside YMCA in Manhattan, Shade Jalo and his team at the YMCA of Greater Tulsa and the Starbuck Family for making this work possible.

Thank you to Verizon for their support of this work, and especially our Verizon colleagues Brittany Chambers, Jessica Jennings, Dianne Koval, and Alex Servello for their partnership.

Generously funded by Verizon.

SUGGESTED CITATION

Lenhart, A. (2025). *The family tech cycle: Navigating screens, devices and social media*. New York, NY: Joan Ganz Cooney Center

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