

A Field Guide for Tech Developers & Product Teams

SESAME WORKSHOP

Joan Ganz Cooney Center

Every family experiences these stages each time a new device, app, or platform enters the home. The parents we spoke to agreed that it is exhausting to navigate endless tech settings and decisions. Here are some suggestions about how design can lighten the load.

DESIGN RECOMMENDATIONS

UNBOXING & DEFAULTS

- + Build a tiered, age-aware onboarding flow for new devices, apps, and platforms.
- + Ship with safety settings ON by default: private profiles, location off, minimal data collection for minors.
- + Never paywall child-safety or parental-control features.

DIGITAL LITERACY & READINESS

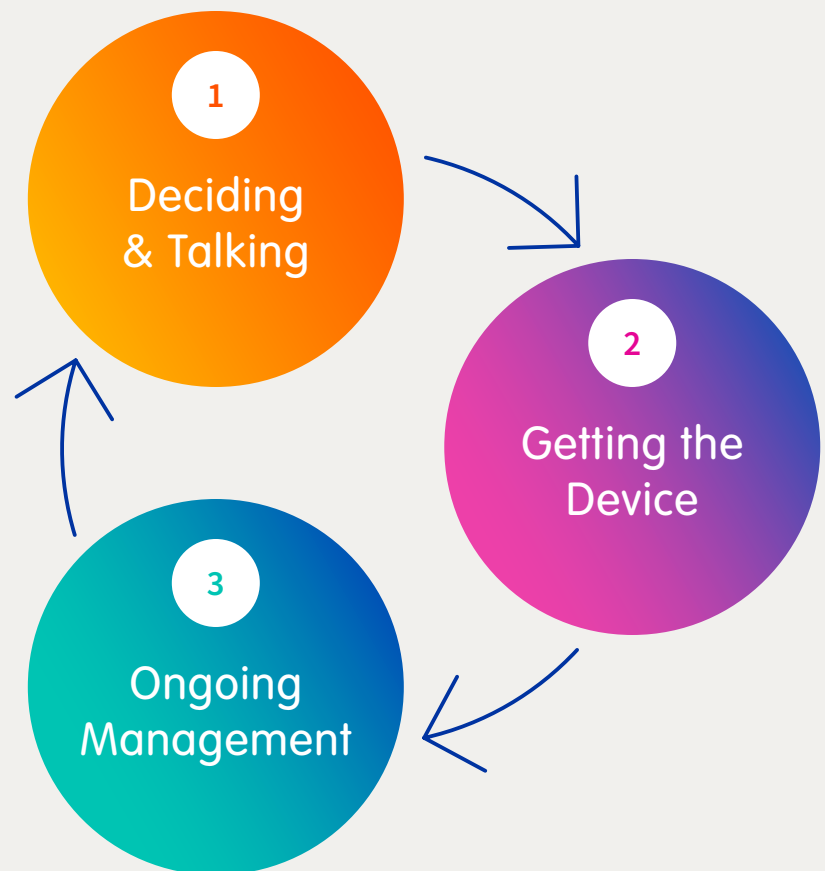
- + Add built-in screen-time meters that show time left/spent at a glance, per app and per device.
- + Let kids document behaviors and earn new privileges as they show readiness.
- + Deliver literacy content playfully through conversation-starter decks, quizzes, and short narrative content.

KID-FRIENDLY EXPERIENCES

- + Design opportunities to exit a game or chat gracefully when time runs out.
- + Offer customizable filters or AI-assisted shields so kids can self-manage scary or unwanted content.
- + Build simplified “kid modes” that unlock functionality gradually as a child ages.

THE FAMILY TECH CYCLE

Every family experiences these three stages with each new device or platform—and most products only design for stage 2.



WHAT FAMILIES TOLD US

PARENTS ARE EXHAUSTED

Every design choice should reduce their cognitive load, not add another setting to manage.

KIDS WANT AUTONOMY, NOT JUST RULES

They accept limits when the “why” is explained and rules apply to adults too.

SAFETY SHOULDN'T DEPEND ON PARENTS' OVERSIGHT

Parents don't always know a setting exists, let alone that it needs changing.

KIDS' AGES AND DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES MATTER

Readiness should be earned, not assumed by age.

Source: Lenhart, A. (2025). *The Family Tech Cycle: Navigating Screens, Devices, and Social Media*. Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop.

SCAN TO READ



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