

FAMILY SAFETY

How To Set Up A Safe First Phone For A Child

Plain-English how-to. ~45 minutes. Right device + right setup + right boundaries.

Giving a child their first phone is one of the biggest digital decisions a family makes. Done well, it's a step toward independence and connection. Done poorly, it's a 24/7 distraction machine that brings the worst of the internet into their bedroom.

Most setups fail because parents either over-restrict (kid sees phone as battle) or under-restrict (kid is overwhelmed). The sweet spot: solid default boundaries that loosen over time, paired with conversation and a written phone contract you both signed.

By the end of this guide you'll have a child's phone properly configured — Apple Family Sharing or Google Family Link, screen time limits that match age, parental approvals for purchases and new apps, and a phone contract that becomes a teaching tool rather than a punishment list.

Quick snapshot

What you'll learn	Pick the right phone, configure Family Sharing/Link, set screen time + content filters, write a phone contract.
Skill level	Parent-friendly
Time required	45 minutes
What you'll need	The new phone, parent's phone, decisions about phone rules
Risk if you skip this	Kid gets full adult internet with no boundaries
PDF kit	■ Download at the bottom of this page

Why this matters

Smartphones are the most powerful technology a child will ever own — entertainment, communication, surveillance, and target acquisition for advertisers and scammers all in one device.

Default configurations are designed for adults. Out-of-box, a kid's phone has unrestricted app store access, no time limits, no content filtering, and is signed in to an adult-aged account. Each of those needs adjustment.

Family Sharing (Apple) and Family Link (Google) make this manageable. They let you approve purchases, set time limits, restrict apps, and see usage — without requiring constant manual oversight.

Before you start

Decide on the device: iPhone (cleaner family controls), Android (more flexibility, varied per manufacturer), or a basic flip phone (lowest risk, highest reliability for younger kids who just need to text).

Choose the rules in advance. Phone in their bedroom overnight? Allowed apps? Screen time limit weekday vs weekend? Decide BEFORE setup so you can configure it once.

Have your phone and theirs ready, plus their Apple ID / Google account. Block 45 minutes — interrupted setups often skip critical settings.

Step 1 — Create their account through Family Sharing or Family Link

iPhone: **Settings** → **Family** → **Add Member** → **Create Child Account**. Sets the account age to under-13, automatically enabling all parental controls and approval requirements.

Android: **familylink.google.com** on your phone, then create a Google account for the child. Install Family Link on parent + child devices.

Step 2 — Set Screen Time / Family Link limits

iPhone: **Settings** → **Screen Time** → **Family Sharing** → **[child]** → **App Limits**. Recommended starting points: Social ~30 min/day, Games ~1 hr/day, Downtime 9pm-7am.

Android: Family Link → child's profile → Daily limit. Set bedtime. Set per-app limits for the social and gaming apps.

Step 3 — Require parent approval for new apps and purchases

iPhone: **Settings** → **Screen Time** → **[child]** → **Ask to Buy: ON**. Now every download requires your approval via push notification.

Android: Family Link → child → Controls → App permissions and Purchases → require approval.

Step 4 — Content + privacy restrictions

iPhone: **Settings** → **Screen Time** → **Content & Privacy Restrictions** → **ON**. Set Web Content to Limit Adult Websites. Set App Store age to 12+. Restrict explicit content in Music, Books, Movies.

Android: Family Link → Filters → Google Play (block by age rating), Google Search (filter explicit), YouTube (Restricted Mode).

Step 5 — Disable risky settings by default

Turn off: in-app purchases (or require approval), Siri/Google Assistant suggestions for adult content, location sharing to apps (except Find My/Find Device).

Disable AirDrop / Nearby Share to 'Contacts Only' or off. Disable random stranger messaging in iMessage settings.

Step 6 — Configure messaging and social

For under-13: no Instagram, no TikTok (against their TOS anyway, but parents often skip). Acceptable for younger kids: iMessage/Google Messages with family + close friends, Family-friendly games.

Set 'Communication Limits' on iPhone: Allowed contacts during screen time and downtime — usually 'Contacts Only.'

Step 7 — Set up Find My / Find Device

iPhone: **Settings** → [child] → **Find My** → **Share Location with Family**. Android: Family Link automatically supports location sharing.

Useful for safety (lost phone) AND boundary (you can verify they're where they said). Make sure the kid understands you have it.

Step 8 — Sign a phone contract together

A one-page written agreement: phone-free zones (dinner, homework, bedroom overnight), what happens if rules are broken, what makes rules loosen over time.

Use companion download as starting template. Sign together. Post visibly. Review every 6 months.

PRO TIP

Default Restrictive. Loosen With Earned Trust.

Starting permissive and tightening creates conflict.

Starting restrictive and loosening builds trust over time.

Family Sharing + Ask-to-Buy is the single most useful setting.

Phone contract makes rules a partnership, not an imposition.

If you want to go further: power-user upgrades

Power-user upgrade #1 — Use Bark or Gabb for monitored kid-specific phones

Phones designed for children with built-in monitoring and content filtering.

Trade-off: subscription cost, kid identifies it as a kid phone.

Power-user upgrade #2 — Set up DNS filtering at home network

NextDNS / Cloudflare for Families catches malware and adult content network-wide.

Trade-off: 30-min router setup.

Power-user upgrade #3 — Enable Communication Safety on iPhone

iOS scans incoming/outgoing photos in iMessage for nudity, blurs them, alerts the child.

Trade-off: requires iOS 15.2+.

Power-user upgrade #4 — Annual privacy audit on the child's phone

Review installed apps, granted permissions, time-spent reports. 30 min/year.

Trade-off: takes 30 min.

Power-user upgrade #5 — Use a separate kid Apple ID linked to family payment

All purchases go through parent approval and parent's card.

Trade-off: requires Family Sharing setup.

Power-user upgrade #6 — Establish a 'phone parking lot' nightly

All devices charge in the kitchen overnight. Removes bedroom-phone temptation entirely.

Trade-off: enforcement consistency.

Common mistakes & pitfalls

Mistake — Giving an unrestricted adult-account phone.

Fix — Skips every default protection. Use child account from day 1.

Mistake — Never reviewing settings after setup.

Fix — Kids learn workarounds. Quarterly review catches them.

Mistake — Allowing phone in bedroom overnight.

Fix — Single biggest impact on sleep + risky-content exposure.

Mistake — Letting screen time creep.

Fix — Goals become floors. Recalibrate periodically.

Mistake — Not signing a phone contract.

Fix — Contract is a teaching tool, not punishment.

Mistake — Punishing report of mistakes.

Fix — Closes the safety valve.

Mistake — Skipping ongoing conversation.

Fix — Settings alone don't teach judgment.

Pro tips

Pro tip 1. Start strict, loosen over time. Builds trust without setting up battles.

Pro tip 2. The phone contract is your ally — refer to it instead of arguing fresh each time.

Pro tip 3. Talk through the why for each rule once. Then enforce calmly.

Pro tip 4. Use Screen Time / Family Link weekly report as a discussion starter, not a punishment trigger.

Pro tip 5. Pair phone rules with phone-free family time. Modeling matters.

Frequently asked questions

What age is right for a first phone?

Depends on the kid, the family, and the type of phone. Many families do a basic phone at 10-12, smartphone at 13+. There's no universal answer.

Should it be in their name or mine?

On the carrier account: yours. The phone itself: doesn't matter; the child account is what governs the experience.

How strict should screen time be?

Recommendations vary. AAP suggests no more than 2 hours of recreational screen time for school-age kids. Start there; adjust based on what's working.

Can I read their messages?

Apple doesn't let you read iMessage without their account password. Family Link on Android shows some info. Many parents start with 'I might check sometimes' and follow through occasionally.

What if my kid is years younger than their friends?

Real social pressure, no easy answer. Talk about it. Many families do basic phones earlier than smartphones to bridge the gap.

What about the bedroom-phone debate?

The data is clear: phones in bedrooms hurt sleep, drive late-night anxiety scrolling, and create predator risk during private hours. Default to no.

Can I lock the phone remotely?

iPhone: Lost Mode via Find My. Android: lock via Family Link. Both supported.

Quick recap — do these in order

DO THIS RIGHT NOW

The 8-step recap.

1. Choose device (iPhone / Android / basic flip).
2. Create kid account via Family Sharing or Family Link.
3. Set Screen Time / time limits + Downtime.
4. Require parent approval for apps + purchases.
5. Content + privacy restrictions on.
6. Disable risky settings (in-app, AirDrop, location).
7. Set up Find My / Find Device.
8. Sign a phone contract together.

Mini glossary

Family Sharing: Apple's parental control framework.

Family Link: Google's parental control framework.

Ask to Buy: iPhone setting requiring parent approval for purchases.

Screen Time: iPhone built-in time management tools.

Downtime: Scheduled hours when most apps are blocked.

Communication Safety: iOS feature that blurs nude images automatically.