

Between ages 14 and 17, let's prioritize their digital well-being

This document compiles 10 evidence-based recommendations drawn from recent scientific research and public health guidelines, aimed at promoting safe digital environments and protecting the mental health of adolescents between 14 and 17 years old. We recommend adapting these guidelines to each family's specific context.

DC DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP — Building autonomy

1 Define the rules together

Screen access is not an acquired right but a privilege subject to compliance with norms. Defining rules as a family builds commitment. Visit: healthychildren.org/English/fmp/Pages/MediaPlan.aspx

2 Encourage real-world autonomy

Assigning responsibilities, independent mobility, and real phone calls helps them feel useful and capable, providing a source of emotional strength and purpose.

3 Educate about critical consumption

Understanding that the tech business model uses online time to collect data and predict behavior is essential knowledge today. Discuss advertising, privacy, AI, and persuasive design.

DW DIGITAL WELL-BEING — Physical and mental health

4 Limit screen time

Adolescents who spend more than 3 hours a day on social media have double the risk of mental health difficulties. Limit social media and video games to max. 1 hour on weekdays and 2 hours on weekends.

5 Remove screens from bedrooms

Screens in bedrooms at night keep the brain in an excited state and facilitate access to inappropriate unsupervised content. Screen "parking lot" 1 hour before bedtime.

6 Protect sleep quality

Blue light blocks melatonin and dopamine from social media keeps the brain alert. Avoid screens 60 minutes before bedtime. Ages 13 to 17: 8 to 10 hours of sleep per night.

NN THE NON-NEGOTIABLES — Protection and safety

7 Support classroom restrictions

Restrictions promote face-to-face interactions and reduce cyber-incidents. Without supportive family rules, they will compensate at home. Avoid sending smartphones to school and use official channels.

8 Establish screen-free zones

Face-to-face interactions are the only way to learn to read social context. Rules: no smartphones at the table, disconnected in the car, no screens with friends.

9 Install parental controls

Parental monitoring reduces rates of depression and anxiety. It's not a lack of trust but necessary protection. Use native tools (Apple, Microsoft, Google) or Qustodio.

10 Delay smartphones and social media until age 16

Between ages 9 and 15, the brain is hypersensitive to persuasive design. If you haven't given them devices yet, wait until 16. If they already have them, install controls and set strict limits.

How to know if they're ready?

Although age is a first point of reference, smartphone and social media use requires emotional maturity. Ask yourself these questions:

Can they disconnect 1 hour before bedtime?

A teenager who needs their device to fall asleep or who you have to fight with every night to disconnect has developed dependency. It's a sign they're not yet ready.

"Do they respect rules and limits in other areas?"

If they can't manage the basics in the physical world (losing belongings, not checking in when leaving, breaking limits), it will be harder for them to take care of a device and respect digital limits.

Have there been vulnerability factors?

When situations of violence, exclusion, or mental health problems have been experienced, a smartphone can act as an amplifier of these risks. Carefully evaluate the appropriateness.

3+ hrs/day

on social media doubles the risk of mental health problems

— Surgeon General's Advisory on Social Media, 2023

Note: The recommendations presented here are informational and intended to guide digital well-being. They do not replace personalized professional advice. Each family should adapt these guidelines to their own context and needs. Prepared by Viviana Quintero as part of a consultancy for UNCOLI.