

Growing Up in a Digital World

Technology & the Developing Child: 8 habits that help kids thrive

Ages 5–11 are when kids build attention, self-control, friendships and lifelong habits. Technology isn't good or bad on its own. What matters is **what** they use, **how much**, **when**, and **whether you're involved**. Routines set now are far easier to keep than rules added in middle school.

THE GOLDEN RULE

"If anything online makes you scared or uncomfortable, tell me. You won't be in trouble."

1 Make a family media plan

- Agree together on when, where and how much.
- Sleep, play, homework and family time come first; screens fit around them.
- Post it where everyone can see it, and revisit every few months.

2 Protect sleep and downtime

- Charge devices outside bedrooms overnight.
- Screens off about an hour before bed.
- Let kids be bored sometimes. It builds creativity and patience.

3 Choose quality over quantity

- Pick age-appropriate, slower-paced, creative content.
- Watch out for autoplay, streaks and loot boxes built to keep kids hooked.
- Co-view and co-play: screen time becomes talk time.

4 Create tech-free zones

- Keep meals, car rides and bedtime screen-free when you can.
- Model it yourself. Model pauses, limits, and intentional device use as adults.
- Try a family charging station everyone uses.

5 Teach digital citizenship

- **Kind:** if you wouldn't say it in person, don't type it.
- **Private:** never share name, school, address or passwords.
- **Careful:** online "friends" you haven't met are strangers.
- **Curious:** not everything online is true. Who made it, and why?

6 Talk about AI

- AI chatbots are tools, not friends, and they can be wrong.
- Never share private information with them.
- Bring feelings and big questions to a trusted adult.
- Follow school guidance on AI for homework.

7 Use controls and conversation

- Turn on parental controls, filters and purchase approvals on every device.
- Keep connected devices in shared family spaces.
- Filters are a seatbelt. Trust is what makes kids tell you.

8 Wait on social media and phones

- Most social platforms require age 13+; many experts suggest waiting longer.
- Consider a basic phone or watch first.
- Waiting is easier when class families agree together.

When to check in: signs that screens may be causing problems

- Meltdowns or big irritability when screen time ends
- Sleep problems, headaches or slipping grades
- Losing interest in friends, play or favorite activities
- Secretive device use or mood changes after being online

If you notice these, talk with your child, and reach out to your pediatrician or school counselor if you're concerned.