SMART FAMILIES

BE SMART

SCIENCE NEWSLETTER

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When Belonging **Has a Price Tag**

Holiday wish lists can reveal more than what a child hopes to unwrap. They can also reveal what a child believes is necessary to belong. A particular phone, gaming device, or brand may seem to promise friendship, confidence, or a place in the group.

Wanting to fit in is understandable. Children notice what receives attention and what becomes a reason for exclusion. A purchase can begin to feel like a requirement for acceptance. Those who have the desired item may feel pressure to keep up, while those without it may wonder whether they measure up.

Parents can listen for the wish beneath the request:

“What are you hoping this would change for you?”

The answer may reveal a desire for independence, a worry about being left out, or an interest worth encouraging. Understanding that desire helps parents respond thoughtfully while holding a boundary.

Children deserve opportunities to feel valued for their humor, kindness, interests, and contributions. Families can encourage friendships and activities that do not require a particular device. The attention we give and the traditions we share can help children experience belonging that does not have to be purchased.



Your Child's Attention Is Valuable



A child can watch videos without buying anything and still generate value for a company. On advertising-funded platforms, advertisers pay to reach users. Keeping people watching creates more opportunities to show advertisements.

Traditional toy advertising tries to make children want a product. Digital platforms can also learn from users' responses. Algorithms use signals such as viewing history, likes, and time spent watching to select what appears next. The Federal Trade Commission has documented how companies use these systems to increase engagement and support advertising revenue. FTC report

Autoplay and endless scrolling offer few natural stopping points. Another video begins. Another recommendation appears. A platform's financial interests can conflict with a family's priorities for a child's day.

Parents can explain the commercial interests shaping this experience:

"This app earns money by showing advertisements. It has features designed to help you keep watching."

Recognizing how a platform works does not make its pull disappear. Adults still need to set boundaries. Protecting a child's attention preserves time for friendships, unfinished projects, conversations, and the chance to discover an interest through unhurried exploration.

When an Advertisement **Feels Like a Friend**

An influencer speaks directly to the camera, shares an embarrassing story, and discusses a favorite product. The setting is casual. To a child who watches regularly, this person can begin to feel familiar.

That familiarity matters when a sales message appears. A recommendation may feel like advice from someone the child knows, even though the relationship is largely one-sided. The Federal Trade Commission warns that children can struggle to recognize and evaluate advertising woven into entertainment and delivered through familiar personalities. FTC research



When creators receive payment, free products, or commissions for promoting something, they are participating in advertising. They may sincerely enjoy the product, but viewers need to understand their commercial relationship with the company. FTC guidance

Look together for labels such as "ad," "sponsored," or "paid partnership." Discuss shopping links that may earn the creator money. Then ask:

"What might this person gain if you want what they're showing you?"

These conversations help children separate affection for a personality from judgment about a purchase. Someone can be entertaining and persuasive without knowing what a particular child needs.

Newer Doesn't Tell Us **What We Need**

A phone that worked yesterday can begin to feel inadequate when a friend receives a newer one. The screen still works. The same functions are available. What has changed is the comparison.

Better cameras, faster processors, and updated designs may offer useful improvements. But newness does not tell us whether those improvements matter in everyday life.

Families can slow the decision down:

"What would this help you do that you cannot do now?"

Sometimes there is a clear answer. A device may be broken or unable to perform a needed task. Other times, the hoped-for improvement is being noticed or avoiding embarrassment. Those feelings deserve conversation before they become a reason to spend.

Adults can model this judgment: "That looks interesting, but what I have still does what I need." Children can see us repair possessions and enjoy older items without apologizing for them.

Children need opportunities to discover what they enjoy, develop abilities, contribute to family life, and feel comfortable being themselves, with support from people they trust.

Contentment leaves room to appreciate things without asking them to establish our worth. Learning to recognize "enough" gives children greater freedom to choose according to their interests and values.

Gifts for Curiosity, Connection, and Joy

A thoughtful gift can say, "I see what matters to you." Our upcoming More Than What We Own gift guide will explore six ways to help children feel known, encourage their interests, and enjoy life together.

Time Together

A shared activity or planned afternoon gives children something to anticipate and the pleasure of your attention.

Something to Create

Materials chosen around a child's interests make room for imagination, experimentation, and bringing ideas to life.

Something to Discover

A book or an opportunity to explore invites children to follow their curiosity and see something familiar differently.

A Chance to Learn

Support an interest the child wants to pursue with time, tools, or encouragement.

Room to Play and Explore

Make space for movement, adventure, and uncomplicated fun, without requiring an accomplishment.

Something Personal

A shared memory, family story, or handwritten message reminds children how deeply they are known and loved.

Look for our forthcoming supplement with practical ideas for different ages, interests, and budgets, including gifts families can make, borrow, or give through their time and attention.



What Comes Home With the Gift?

A technology gift can bring accounts, subscriptions, purchases, messaging, and new expectations about a child's availability.

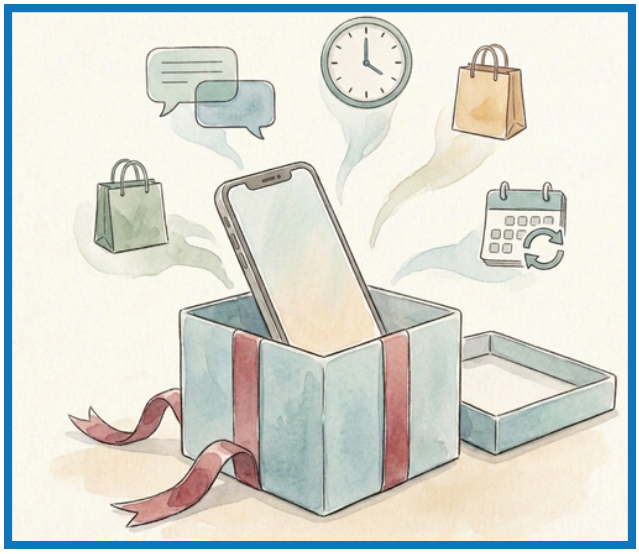
How it is introduced matters. A child receiving a phone as a personal gift may hear, "This is mine." Parents may intend supervision and limits, while the child expects independence. Later restrictions can feel like taking back the gift, leaving parents hesitant to enforce boundaries.

Introducing a first phone separately from holiday gifts can create a clearer starting point. Present it as a tool used within agreed family rules. Discuss where it will be used and stored, which apps are allowed, purchase approvals, and how boundaries may change as responsibilities develop.

If a phone has already been given, parents can still clarify expectations. Ownership does not mean unrestricted use or remove parents' responsibility to provide guidance.

A holiday deadline does not have to become a deadline for access. Honor the Smart Families commitment to prioritize family values and delay smartphones until high school. Explain your plans to relatives.

Ask: "What place will this gift take in our child's life after the holidays?" Consider the routines it supports and demands it introduces. A thoughtful gift should fit the childhood a family is working to protect.



Smart Families Community Norms

Delay Smartphones Until High School

Smartphones are addictive, heighten anxiety and depression, and expose children to harmful content. Children thrive when they live free from the disordered influence of smartphones.

Delay Social Media Until 16

The evidence is overwhelming: early social media is not only correlated with poor mental health, but can actually cause it.

Prioritize Your Family and Your Values

Core values like avoiding temptation, humility, self-sacrifice, and acknowledging evil are less mainstream than in generations past and must be fought for.

Commit to a Phone-Free School Day

Families should strive to keep schools free of distractions. School should be a place where children have authentic human experiences.

Support Smart Families

Did you know that Smart Families now accepts donations? **With your help, we can bring our programs and resources to even more communities.** To learn more, visit: **smart-families.org/donate**

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