

Kids and smartphones

Parents of preteens know the dismay that comes with this image — kids flopped on the couch for stretches of time, silent and mesmerized by smartphones.

Maybe it's Snapchat, maybe its Facebook, Instagram or games — but they scroll and scroll, oblivious to an outside world that beckons with all things tangible and sunny: a hike, a baseball diamond, a bike ride.

The things that lure kids into their own walled-off worlds have evolved over the years: Pac-Man in the 1980s, Nintendo in the 1990s. Today, it's a smartphone that at times can seem like the Atlantic Ocean between you and your children. Recently, a backlash against the trend has burgeoned in the form of Wait Until 8th, a movement that encourages parents to hold off on giving their children smartphones until the eighth grade, when their kids are usually 13 or 14.

The group launched this spring and now has more than 2,000 parents as members. There's nothing binding in being a member. Parents simply take a pledge to "wait until eighth," adhering to the group's belief that elementary school is too soon for kids to start tapping and scrolling on smartphones.

There's a need for children who haven't reached their teen years to have phones

for communication and safety reasons, but the group stresses that major cellular service carriers offer basic packages for calls and texts — without data plans.

But we think there's a better way to look at this. Kids still bond in playgrounds, school hallways and backyards, but smartphones have changed the way we socialize, and that doesn't just go for grown-ups. Kids now connect digitally, through texts, FaceTime, social media, the list goes on. It's a reality parents can't ignore.

But it's also a reality parents don't have to accept unconditionally. Being a parent means being proactive about everything, and that includes being attentive stewards of their kids' use of smartphones. Keeping them off the dinner table and away from reach at bedtime are sensible ground rules. There are also apps that allow parents to control when their kids can use their phones and what apps are accessible. Setting boundaries is part of a parent's job description, and that's especially important when it comes to a kid's smartphone use.

It's up to each parent to decide when to buy a smartphone for their child, and how to monitor the device's usage.

What matters is being engaged enough in your kids' use of the phone to know if, when — and how — it becomes a problem.