



My child is addicted to their phone, what can I do?



Many parents worry about their child's phone use and are concerned that if their child is using their phone too much that they are "addicted". For most young people this isn't the case and is more a response to the current norms of our technological age and the culture of young people today.

WHAT IS AN ADDICTION?

An addiction can be defined as "...not having control over doing, taking or using something to the point where it becomes harmful to you" - <https://www.nhs.uk/live-well/healthy-body/addiction-what-is-it/>. For instance, if your child is using their phone in risky situations or

if they are choosing to be on the phone instead of sleeping or eating. When we say instead of sleeping or eating, we are talking about not being able to function normally at school because of exhaustion due to excessive phone use. (We will explore this a little further down the page).

Before you think about whether your child is addicted, it's important to think about **the what, the how** and **the why**.

EXPLORING YOUR CHILD'S PHONE USE

The what – What does your child spend a lot of time doing on their phone? Do they meet and chat socially with friends? Do they research make up tutorials? Do they chat while gaming? Do they have an intense interest that they are exploring? Is it really the phone that they are drawn to or is it what they are doing on their phone that they are drawn to?

The how – How are they spending their time on their phone? Do they mostly spend time after school or before bed? Are they waking up in the night and sneaking off to get their phone to stay up and use?

The why – Why is your child using their phone? Are they spending time with friends and feeling a sense of being a part of their tribe or their group? Do they get a sense of achievement from winning a game? Are they spending time on their phone to help distract them from a current problem or painful emotion?





Understanding these three things will help you to begin to make sense of why your child is choosing to spend time on their phone.

LET'S EXPLORE SOME COMMON REASONS...

Social Life & FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) - FOMO is a very real thing with often very real consequences. Young people's whole social lives, their social circles and their daily connection with people who get them is often nurtured through their phone. Not being able to respond to a message or to an invite to something can leave a young person missing out or being left behind. Our brains are wired to look for safety and being a part of a community or close knit group often means safety for us.

Distraction – Many young people who struggle with their mental health will look for ways to distract themselves. This helps to manage difficult emotions and often overwhelming thoughts. Watching videos on YouTube or gaming to take a break from the noise in their heads and the feelings in their bodies. Many parents will punch it out at the gym, have a glass of wine, watch tv or talk to a partner for some temporary relief. We all find different coping mechanisms that work for us.

A sense of achievement – That buzz that you get when you win something

or do really well. Many young people who game through their phones will be experiencing a sense of achievement. Every time they win a game or up-level on something this triggers a chemical response in the brain that moves through the body causing a feel-good boost. This feeling is something that we are wired to pursue as people: to always strive to do well.

Habit – Many young people build up their cell phone use over time and it becomes a routine or habit. Again, as humans we love routine and our brains are wired for it. Mostly we don't know that this is happening and it becomes our auto-pilot - similar to when you are driving to the shops and can't remember how you got there. Your child may start their day and end their day on their phone without even thinking about it. This is because our brains are constantly firing neurons and creating a map or pathways within our brain. The more we do something, the more neurons fire off and the more we cement that pathway. This is how a habit forms. We all have healthy habits and not so healthy habits.





To gain a deeper understanding of your child's phone use, let's explore an example of the pros (balanced use) and cons (imbalanced use). These will be different for each young person.

Pros – Balanced Use

- ✓ Deepening friendships and bonds
- ✓ Improved social skills
- ✓ Researching and learning
- ✓ Stress relief and rest time
- ✓ Better organisational skills
- ✓ Timekeeping improved
- ✓ Lowers anxiety levels
- ✓ Boosting attention levels and alertness
- ✓ “Brain Games” help to slow the ageing process
- ✓ Creates solution focused thinkers
- ✓ Helps with homework
- ✓ Improved hygiene
- ✓ Improved creativity
- ✓ Improves problem solving skills
- ✓ Better career prospects
- ✓ Boost confidence
- ✓ Improved mental health

Cons – Imbalanced Use

- ✗ Sleep disturbance
- ✗ Heightened anxiety
- ✗ Increased arguments at home
- ✗ Self-harm
- ✗ Body pain
- ✗ Poor hygiene
- ✗ Mood swings
- ✗ Increased anger
- ✗ Avoidance of healthy relationships and tasks
- ✗ Poor nutrition
- ✗ Digestive issues
- ✗ Low immune system
- ✗ Chronic fatigue or exhaustion
- ✗ Headaches / Migraine
- ✗ Eye strain



Signs & Symptoms of imbalanced phone use vary from person to person. The most important sign to look for is an obsessive or unhealthy relationship with their phone that is harming their health or wellness.



SIGNS AND SYMPTOMS CAN INCLUDE:

- ✔ Irritability and mood swings
- ✔ Lying about what they use their phone for or when they use their phone
- ✔ Anxiety
- ✔ Depression
- ✔ OCD – Obsessive Compulsive Disorder
- ✔ Panic attacks
- ✔ Feelings of guilt or shame around phone use
- ✔ Low self-esteem and confidence
- ✔ Spending large amounts of time thinking or obsessing about their phone
- ✔ Feeling a loss of control around phone use
- ✔ Distorted body image – thinking they are fat even when they are underweight
- ✔ Social isolation
- ✔ Low moods
- ✔ Anger
- ✔ Perfectionism (most commonly found in teen girls around social media)
- ✔ Anxiety around being without a phone
- ✔ Weight loss and low body weight
- ✔ Changes in weight
- ✔ Lack of interest in daily life
- ✔ Poor circulation
- ✔ Exhaustion and struggling to sleep
- ✔ Digestive problems
- ✔ Weight gain or loss
- ✔ Chronic fatigue
- ✔ Inability to concentrate
- ✔ Headaches



HOW CAN YOU HELP YOUR CHILD TO EXPLORE THEIR PHONE USE AND FIND MORE BALANCE?

1 Make time to talk to your child to get to know the what and the how around their phone use. Ask questions, show genuine interest. At this stage you are being a detective and wanting to know more. Note the times that your child is most active. How do they appear? Anxious or restless etc.

2 Now that you have more of an idea of what they spend their time doing and how they spend their time, it's time to explore the why **together**. It is very important to do this together. Take some time to learn from them and really listen without judgement or interruption. Help your child to understand for themselves what they gain.

3 Create a pros and cons list **together**. Get to know how the phone is impacting positively and negatively on your child's life. Again, ensure to come at this from a non-judgmental approach. Hear, validate and hold the conversation. Explore the physical body, mind and mental health, emotions and feelings. Explore how this is impacting on everyday life.

4 Think about ways **together** that your child can make small changes to their phone life that will bring more balance. Support your child to really understand what the impact of this could be.

WHAT SHOULD I KNOW AS A PARENT?

Avoid the use of the term "addiction" when it comes to phone use.

For many young people (and adults) this is just a normal part of life. This language can be belittling and disempowering and shut down the possibility of connection and conversation.

Model healthy behaviour and walk your talk.

If you are asking your child not to spend time on their phone at dinner time or to reduce their use, think about how you and other members of your household use phones. Be honest with yourself and your child – If you catch yourself saying things like "oh but I'm on my phone for



work and so it's different", recognise this and be willing to make changes too.

Try to understand from your child's perspective

We can never begin to predict the importance of phone use for a child. It may be a safety anchor for something else. It may be the only positive social interaction that they get. It may be the way that they best distract themselves from painful emotions or flashbacks. Have an open mind to learn more from their perspective.

Recognise the norms and culture for today's youth

Things are very different to when when you were a child. Today phones, the internet, gaming and technology are how young people connect, socialise, interact, learn, grow and be with each other. Recognise the importance of this for your child.

Help your child to find balance

Work through the exercises together and remember that you are looking for balance and not a total end to any phone use.

Take gradual steps

Help your child to work at a pace that feels comfortable and respects their needs too.

Agree a way forward together

Together means your child will often

accept the change for themselves and will take bigger steps to create change in their life.

Celebrate any wins

Help your child to celebrate their achievements along the way. The wins are important to recognise the change and to deepen your relationship and trust.

Get help if you need to

Contact a professional counsellor or charity that has knowledge around addictions for support if you feel that you need some extra advice or help.

For more information on technology use, visit:

<https://parentinfo.org/articles/all>

