

An “Ethics Manual” for Your Teen’s Electronics

by Wes Crenshaw, Ph.D.



Each time a new electronic device enters your home, sit down with your child and create clear guidelines for its use by outlining the five Ws (and an H):

1. **Who** may use it?
2. **What** may it be used to do?
3. **When** may it be used?
4. **Where** may it be used?
5. **Why** is this rule being set?
6. **How** will this rule be enforced?

Many parents say, “I’m going to trust you with this until you show me that you can’t be trusted.” Don’t do this. Don’t wait for a problem to emerge before you set boundaries with your child’s new device. It’s a recipe for disaster. Kids just aren’t that trustworthy. It’s not how they’re wired.

Set up a plan in the beginning, then follow that plan. Understand from the start that there are going to be shortcomings and failings. That is part of being a kid; don’t take it personally.

1 WHO MAY USE THE DEVICE?

Explain that the phone (or video game console) belongs to you as a parent, and that you are kindly sharing it with your child. Your child may only use it within certain parameters, not because you are

possessive and controlling, but because you are the parent who maintains ownership.

Say this up front, the first time you give your child a device. Otherwise, this rule will never be established. Then, say it repeatedly. Phones have become very personalized experiences, so children often feel their technology is an extension of themselves if they are not given frequent reminders otherwise.

2 WHAT MAY THE DEVICE BE USED TO DO?

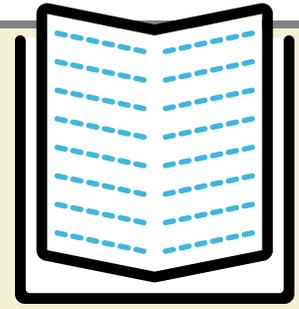
Explain what activities are allowed, like posting photos with friends on Instagram. Make clear what information she will and will not be allowed to access and/or send. Establish the consequence that the phone will be taken away if, for example, your child Snapchats inappropriate photos or searches for pornography.

Children are not entitled to have a phone with no restrictions. You don’t need to feel guilty about setting device filters. Use a parental control program like [Mobicip](#) to set filters on what your child can access.

3 WHEN MAY THE DEVICE BE USED?

The two most important times for restricting device use are during homework and at bedtime. Kids will come up with every excuse on the planet for why they need a phone – to listen to music while falling asleep, to do research for a project – but it is just a ploy to get a device that will then keep them from focusing or sleeping.

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Children with ADHD are more susceptible to being so genuinely caught up with a phone that they don’t get around to doing the things they need to do.

Phones and video game consoles need scheduled time outs during appropriate times, and whenever they are being misused.

4 WHERE MAY THE DEVICE BE USED?

Maybe your child isn’t allowed to use the phone at school, in study areas, or while at the dinner table. If you have a teen learning to drive, it is a good rule to ban using a phone in the car.

Choose places where you want your child to be deferent and thoughtful to other people and relationships, and disallow phone use under those circumstances.

Phones can be engaging in a conversation, if you’re all talking about a new Broadway play and watching a clip together. But if one person is wearing headphones and ignoring everyone else, that is not being deferent to the relationship.

5 WHY IS THIS RULE BEING SET?

While creating the ethics manual, don’t ever utter the phrase, “Because I’m the parent.” The fact that you are the owner of the phone was made clear in step one. It doesn’t mean you get to say, “Well, I said so.” That makes you sound like a dictator, and it doesn’t help your child learn.

Always explain why the rule is being set. Say, “You can’t use your phone at night because you need to

sleep. Sleep is actually important to help your body learn and grow.” Or, “Because at the dinner table we want to engage face to face so we have some time together and then you can go back to your phone.” Through explanation, your child learns priorities and values.

6 HOW WILL THIS RULE BE ENFORCED?

This ethics manual is a guide that helps kids learn how to properly use technology. It’s also a guide for you as you learn to confront your child’s relationship with his or her screens. After creating the ethics manual, don’t take away a phone or shut down a video game system unless it is being misused according to the rules you set up – if screens are being used outside of an appropriate timeframe or used to send inappropriate content.

Don’t take your child’s phone away, for example, if you don’t like her boyfriend and she is calling him all the time. That’s a great way to have a big fight without conveying any meaningful messages.

When a rule is broken, have a conversation about how long the device penalty will last. For children with ADHD, shorter periods without electronics are OK because they often experience them as longer and more painful. The punishment should be just long enough that it gives kids pause the next time around to think, “Do I really want to do this?”

From the *ADDitude* webinar titled *Screen Time for the ADHD Brain: Technology Rules and Systems for Easily Distracted Teens* by Wes Crenshaw, Ph.D.

<http://additu.de/device>