Who Is Raising Our Children Today... Us or the Screens?

When phones, games and artificial intelligence become part of our children's childhood

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Introduction: Everyone is present... but attention is absent

In a family majlis, a grandfather sits among his grandchildren, ready to tell a story from his own childhood. One grandchild is absorbed in a video game, another is scrolling through clips on a tablet, and a third is asking an AI app a question he could have asked his grandfather. The grandfather smiles and waits, then realises that reaching his grandchildren's attention has become harder than reaching the grandchildren themselves.

In another home, the family gathers around the dinner table. The father is checking his phone, the mother is answering messages, and the eldest son is finishing a round of an online game. The father asks his son about his school day and gets a one-word answer, eyes still on the screen. The mother tries to take the tablet away from her little daughter, who starts to cry, so she gives it back to calm her down.

Both scenes are imagined, and they do not describe every Emirati family, but they are familiar enough to raise a question worth pausing on: are screens now sharing in the upbringing of our children, or have we simply given them more room than they should have?

The phone has become a tool for learning, play, friendship and information. With artificial intelligence, a child can now talk to a digital system that answers questions, explains lessons, writes stories and may even offer advice on personal matters. The problem is not that these technologies exist; they offer real opportunities. The problem lies in how they are used, the kind of content a child meets, and what they take away from sleep, movement and family relationships.

This is not a battle between the family and technology. It is a new parenting responsibility: how do we raise children who benefit from the digital world without losing touch with the real one? And how do we set realistic rules that neither deprive the child nor drag the home into a daily conflict?

1. What the research says, and where its limits lie

It is easy to find people who blame screens for every behavioural problem in children, and others who deny any negative effect at all. The scientific evidence paints a more complicated picture than either position.

The first thing to know is that most research in this field is correlational: it observes that two things happen together, but it cannot prove that one causes the other. An anxious child may turn to screens more, just as screens may increase a child's anxiety, and a single study often cannot separate the two directions.

In 2019, Amy Orben and Andrew K. Przybylski of the University of Oxford published a study in Nature Human Behaviour analysing three large datasets covering more than 355,000 adolescents. They found a negative association between digital technology use and psychological well-being, but a very small one: at most, it explained 0.4% of the variation in well-being. The same year, the two researchers published a second study in Psychological Science based on time-use diaries rather than self-estimates, and reached a similar conclusion. Earlier, in 2017, Przybylski and Netta Weinstein tested what they called the "Goldilocks hypothesis" on about 120,000 English adolescents in the same journal: moderate use was not linked to notable harm and may even be beneficial, while excessive use was linked to a modest drop in well-being.

On the other side, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt published The Anxious Generation (Penguin Press, 2024), arguing that the move of childhood onto smartphones and social media contributed to rising anxiety and depression among adolescents. Developmental psychologist Candice Odgers responded with a review in Nature the same year, arguing that most of the evidence does not show large effects and that focusing on phones may distract from other causes. This disagreement is ongoing among serious researchers, and parents deserve to know about it rather than be handed one view as settled fact.

The most recent institutional position comes from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) in its policy statement "Digital Ecosystems, Children, and Adolescents," published in Pediatrics in February 2026, which replaced its earlier guidance. The statement describes the associations between digital media use and adolescent well-being as small and variable, and suggests that early adolescence may be a period of greater susceptibility to negative effects. It stresses that a digital environment designed around children's needs can support learning and well-being, whereas one built to maximise engagement and profit encourages prolonged use that displaces sleep and movement. For that reason, the issue cannot be viewed only through the lens of a child's behaviour or time limits.

The practical lesson: "number of hours" on its own is a poor measure. The better questions are: what is the child watching? When? With whom? And what is it replacing in terms of sleep, play and conversation?

2. Not all screens are the same

The phrase "screen time" lumps very different activities together: an interactive lesson, a video call with grandmother, an endless stream of short clips, a multiplayer game with friends, a conversation with a chatbot. A child learning to read with an app beside his mother is not having the same experience as a child flicking alone, for hours, through clips nobody knows the source of.

A systematic review and meta-analysis led by Sumudu Mallawaarachchi of the University of Wollongong, Australia, published in JAMA Pediatrics in 2024, confirms this. It analysed around one hundred studies of children from birth to age five and looked at the context of use rather than total hours. Program viewing, age-inappropriate content, and caregivers using devices during the child's daily routines were associated with weaker psychosocial outcomes, while co-use with adults was associated with better cognitive outcomes. Background television was associated with weaker cognitive outcomes.

In the same spirit, the Canadian Paediatric Society's guidance, prepared by Dr. Michelle Ponti and published in Paediatrics & Child Health in 2019 (reaffirmed in July 2025), rests on four principles: managing use, encouraging meaningful use, modelling healthy use, and monitoring for problems. It sets no single time limit for school-age children and adolescents, because risks and benefits differ from one child, and one activity, to another.

So instead of "how many hours did my child spend on the phone?", these questions are more useful:

- What is my child watching, and is it suitable for their age?
- Are they using the device alone or with a parent?
- Is the screen affecting their sleep, study or physical activity?
- Can they stop without persistent difficulty?
- Do they still enjoy playing, reading and spending time with the family?

The differences between types of use can be summarised as follows:

Type of use	What it may offer	What deserves attention
Educational viewing with a parent	Language, knowledge, conversation, links to real life	Choice of content and watching together
Video games with friends or family	Cooperation, strategy, fun, connection	Type of game, timing, effect on mood and sleep
Endless short clips	Quick entertainment	Difficulty stopping, effect on attention
AI as a learning aid	Explanation, practice, ideas	Checking information, privacy, over-reliance
Chatbot or "AI companion"	A sense of expression and apparent support	Confusing machine friendliness with friendship, emotional dependence, privacy

3. Sleep: the first thing we lose without noticing

The problem sometimes starts just before bedtime. The child asks for ten more minutes to finish the game; ten minutes become half an hour; then come the clips, until the child is still awake late at night. In the morning the family wakes up to a tired, irritable child with little enthusiasm for school. Parents may call it laziness or stubbornness, when lack of sleep is the first factor worth checking.

Sleep is the area where research findings agree most. In 2016, Ben Carter and colleagues from King's College London, Cardiff University and other institutions published a systematic review and meta-analysis in JAMA Pediatrics covering twenty studies and more than 125,000 children and adolescents, with an average age of about fourteen and a half. They found a consistent association between using portable devices before bed and shorter sleep, poorer sleep quality and daytime sleepiness. Strikingly, children who simply had access to devices in their bedrooms at night, even without using them, were also more likely to sleep too little.

The explanations vary: stimulating content that keeps the mind awake, notifications that interrupt sleep, screen light that may affect the body clock, and above all postponing bedtime "for one more minute." The researchers noted that the quality of the available studies varies, but the direction of the findings is the same. And because lack of sleep affects mood, attention and temper, much of what parents call "screen irritability" may in fact be the irritability of a child who has not slept well.

What can be done? Rather than announcing a sudden ban that provokes resistance, agree with the child on a fixed time when recreational use ends, keep devices out of bedrooms at night, and offer a quiet activity before sleep, such as reading a story or a short chat. Above all, apply the rule consistently, and let parents respect it too: a child who sees his father put his phone aside before bed receives a stronger message than any instruction the adults themselves ignore.

4. Focus and attention: have children lost the ability to be patient?

Some apps are built on rapid switching between clips, rewards and notifications; as soon as one item ends, another begins, with no waiting and no effort. A child used to this rhythm may struggle with activities that need patience, such as reading a long story, finishing homework or practising a skill.

But precision matters here. In a longitudinal study led by Chaelin K. Ra with Adam M. Leventhal and colleagues at the University of Southern California, published in JAMA in 2018, researchers followed 2,587 high-school students who had no significant symptoms of attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) at the start, asking them about 14 digital activities. Two years later, new symptoms appeared in 4.6% of those who did none of the activities frequently, compared with 9.5% of those who did seven frequently and 10.5% of those who did all fourteen. This deserves attention, but it is an association, not proof of cause, and the symptoms were self-reported by students, which is not enough for a clinical diagnosis.

In early childhood, Sheri Madigan and colleagues at the University of Calgary followed 2,441 children and their mothers at ages two, three and five, publishing their results in JAMA Pediatrics in 2019. Higher screen time at ages two and three was linked to weaker later performance on developmental screening tests, while the reverse direction did not appear in the analysis: poorer development was not what led to more screen time. The effect was statistically small, the study relied on mothers' reports, and a screening test is not a diagnosis, but it supports a simple idea: young children learn through touch, movement and back-and-forth conversation, and every hour in front of a screen comes out of that account.

So it is wrong to claim that short videos cause ADHD, or to diagnose a child at home because they get distracted while studying; distraction has many causes, including sleep, anxiety, the study environment and developmental differences. The useful lesson is about organising the environment: a quiet place for homework, notifications switched off, the phone off the desk unless it is needed for the task, and long tasks broken into age-appropriate steps. A child should also learn that a moment of boredom does not require opening the phone immediately; boredom is often where imagination begins, and the child starts inventing a game or asking a question.

5. Why does a child get angry when we take the device away?

Many parents know the scene: a child who is calm throughout the game explodes with anger when asked to switch it off. The parents conclude the only solution is to take it by force, and the disagreement becomes a daily confrontation.

Understanding the behaviour comes before dealing with it. The child may be absorbed in an unfinished activity, afraid of losing progress in the game, or struggling with a sudden switch from something enjoyable to something less appealing. The screen may also have become their usual way of coping with boredom, sadness or frustration.

Jenny S. Radesky and colleagues at the University of Michigan studied this last point in a longitudinal study published in JAMA Pediatrics (January 2023 issue) involving 422 children aged three to five and their parents. Frequent use of devices to calm children was associated with increased emotional reactivity over the follow-up period, more clearly in boys and in children with highly impulsive, intense temperaments. The relationship may run both ways: a child who is harder to soothe may push parents to use the device more. The study does not mean that handing a child a

device in a difficult moment will inevitably weaken their emotional regulation, but it raises a clear parenting question: what does a child learn if the screen is the usual response to every uncomfortable feeling?

Picture a five-year-old crying because his toy broke. His father can hand him the phone until he goes quiet, or he can sit beside him and say: "You're upset because your toy broke? Come, let's see how we can fix it." In the first case the crying may stop quickly; in the second, the child gets a chance to understand and handle his feelings. Using a device in an exceptional situation is not necessarily wrong; what matters is that it does not become the permanent substitute for comfort and conversation.

And if a child gets angry when playtime ends, a father can acknowledge the feeling without backing down from the rule: "I know you're enjoying it and want to keep going, but playtime is over. Save your progress now, and we'll plan when you can continue tomorrow." This approach does not make the anger vanish instantly, but it trains the child to accept limits without feeling that their emotions are being rejected.

6. Social interaction and empathy: what screens cannot give

A child learns empathy by seeing sadness on a brother's face, cooperation by arguing with a friend over a game, and apology by realising that their words have hurt someone. These experiences need repeated human interaction.

A study by Patricia K. Kuhl and colleagues at the University of Washington, published in the Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences in 2003, showed that infants learned the sounds of a foreign language from live speakers in front of them, but did not learn them to the same degree from audio or video recordings of the same material. The study is not about phones or empathy directly, but it shows that the social context is part of early learning itself.

In a study by Yalda T. Uhls and colleagues at the University of California, Los Angeles, published in 2014 in Computers in Human Behavior (Elsevier), about fifty sixth-graders spent five days at an outdoor education camp without devices and were compared with schoolmates who continued their normal routine. The campers improved more in recognising emotions from faces and scenes. It is a

striking result, but critics rightly pointed out that the camp changed many things besides screens: nature, teamwork and living together. So the study is best read as evidence of the value of face-to-face interaction, not as a final verdict on screens.

More importantly for families, screens that absorb adults' attention matter as much as the child's own screen. Brandon T. McDaniel of Illinois State University and Jenny Radesky of the University of Michigan used the term "technoference" for the small daily interruptions devices impose on parent–child interaction. In their 2018 study in Child Development, based on questionnaires from about 170 families with young children, these interruptions, even when few, were associated with more frustration, tantrums and withdrawal in children. In a follow-up study published the same year in Pediatric Research (Springer Nature), a cycle emerged: a child's difficult behaviour raises parental stress, the parent retreats to the phone, and the child's behaviour becomes more difficult. Neither study proves causation, but the picture is familiar in many homes.

At the same time, it is not true that all digital communication weakens relationships. A video call can keep a child close to a grandmother in another city, a multiplayer game can be a space for cooperation, and online groups can give some teenagers friends who share their interests. The better question is: does digital use add new opportunities for connection, or is it gradually replacing face-to-face connection?

Parents do better to watch for specific behaviour than to pass general judgments: does the child mock others the way some content creators do? Do they see the player on the other end as a person with feelings? Can they stop and apologise if they upset a classmate? Saying that "screens make children unempathetic" turns a complex issue into an inaccurate label.

7. When does use become a problem?

The word "addiction" is common in everyday talk, and precision matters. The World Health Organization included "gaming disorder" in the eleventh revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11), adopted by the World Health Assembly in 2019 and in effect since January 2022. The definition is not based on hours, but on three features: impaired control over gaming, giving it priority over other interests and daily activities, and continuing despite negative consequences, with clear impairment in family, school or social life that normally persists for at least twelve months. There is still no single agreed diagnosis that covers all forms of heavy phone or social media use under the name "screen addiction."

This definition reassures parents that a child who loves games and plays a lot during the holidays is not necessarily ill, while giving them sharper warning signs: persistent decline at school, withdrawal from friends and family, regularly disturbed sleep, repeated inability to stop even when they want to, or lying about use.

Heavy use may be a response to an existing problem rather than its cause. If a child turns to games because they have no friends nearby, confiscating the device will not solve the isolation. If a teenager spends long hours on social media seeking acceptance, they may need support for their self-confidence and real-life relationships alongside limits on use. And if a child escapes into the screen whenever there is conflict at home, the way the family communicates may itself need attention.

In fairness, children do not face this alone. Many apps and games are built on designs that extend time spent: autoplay of the next clip, endless scrolling, daily rewards lost if the player is absent, and "your friends are playing now" messages. When a ten-year-old cannot resist a product that a professional team designed to keep him connected, the issue is not just weak willpower. That is why telling him "stop when you've had enough" is not enough, since some platforms are designed to delay that feeling. It is more effective to change the environment: turn off autoplay, agree to stop at the end of the round rather than when the urge ends, and silence notifications at night.

8. Video games: neither devil nor angel

It is unfair to reduce video games to violence or addiction. In a 2014 review in American Psychologist, Isabela Granic and her colleagues Adam Lobel and Rutger C. M. E. Engels of Radboud University in the Netherlands gathered evidence of cognitive, motivational, emotional and social benefits of some games, including improved spatial skills, practice in coping with failure and trying again, and cooperation in multiplayer games. They also stressed that the negative effects studied for decades should not be ignored.

The question of violence is one where science and impressions often get mixed up. In 2015 an American Psychological Association task force concluded that there is a consistent link between violent games and increases in minor aggressive thoughts, feelings and behaviours, with insufficient evidence of a link to criminal violence. In March 2020 the APA reaffirmed that there is insufficient scientific evidence of a causal link between such games and violent behaviour, and that blaming violence on them distracts from other factors. The same year, Christopher J. Ferguson and two colleagues published a reanalysis in Perspectives on Psychological Science concluding that the link to

aggression is weaker than claimed. Earlier, in 2019, Przybylski and Weinstein analysed data from 1,004 British adolescents aged fourteen and fifteen, together with their carers' ratings of their behaviour; their study in Royal Society Open Science found no evidence that recent violent game play is linked to higher aggressive behaviour.

The balanced reading, then: a violent game does not create a criminal, but it is not entirely neutral either, especially for younger children whose situation has been studied less. What really deserves parents' attention is specific: whether the game suits the child's age according to its rating, who the child talks to inside it, whether it pushes repeated purchases, and whether the child faces insults or pressure from other players.

Imagine a ten-year-old who comes home from school, gulps down lunch to start playing, asks to postpone homework, then refuses to switch off at bedtime because he does not want to lose the round. The family's concern here should not be the game alone, but its effect on his life: has his sleep suffered? Has he stopped playing sport? Is he less present in the family? The best approach starts by understanding the game and sharing the child's interest, then setting clear rules: play comes after core responsibilities, sessions end well before bedtime, and multiplayer games are played in a shared space at home whenever possible, not behind a closed door.

9. Inappropriate content: the risk the clock cannot measure

A child may spend only half an hour on a phone yet see bullying, a dangerous challenge or a misleading message in that time. Another child may spend longer on a suitable educational activity under family supervision. Time alone is not enough to judge digital safety. Children often reach harmful content in ways parents do not expect: an algorithmic suggestion after an innocent clip, a chat inside a game, a link from a classmate, or an in-app advert. And content labelled "for kids" is not always suitable; some of it carries aggressive, commercial or confusing messages.

UNICEF's report The State of the World's Children 2017: Children in a Digital World examined the opportunities and risks children face online, including harmful content, privacy violations, exploitation and gaps in access to technology. The American Psychological Association's Health Advisory on Social Media Use in Adolescence (May 2023) recommends closer monitoring in early adolescence, roughly ages ten to fourteen, balanced against the teenager's need for privacy; limiting

content that fuels comparison about appearance and body; and training young people in critical use of these platforms before they join them. The advisory states that social media is not inherently beneficial or harmful.

This raises a question: is it better to restrict or to guide? A survey of 6,400 parents of children aged 6 to 14 in eight European countries, published by Sonia Livingstone and colleagues at the London School of Economics in 2017 in the Journal of Communication, identified two approaches. "Restrictive mediation" was associated with fewer risks but also fewer opportunities. "Enabling mediation," which combines safety measures with conversation and respect for the child's autonomy, was associated with more opportunities and some calculated risk. In other words, a total ban does not produce a child who can protect themselves when the supervisor is absent.

Technical controls help: parental control settings, purchase limits, disabling chats with strangers, and reviewing games before installing them. But they cannot explain to a child what they have seen. A child also needs simple safety rules: do not share your address, school or location; do not send private photos; do not meet anyone you got to know online without your parents knowing; and remember that some people pretend to be someone they are not.

If a child tells their parents they saw something frightening or received a worrying message, the priority is to listen calmly and thank them for telling, then take a sensible step: block or report the account, keep what is needed if the matter must go to the authorities, and contact the school if classmates are involved. Scolding at that moment teaches the child to hide things, and a child who fears punishment may hide a problem precisely when they need help most.

10. Artificial intelligence: who answers our children's questions?

What is new about AI is that it does not just display content; it converses. A child asks and receives an answer in confident, human-sounding language, whether asking for a lesson explained, a story written, a problem solved or advice on a personal matter. These capabilities can support learning and creativity when used well, but they raise questions research is still trying to answer.

Trust first. A study by Lauren N. Girouard-Hallam and Judith H. Danovitch of the University of Louisville, published in 2022 in Developmental Psychology (American Psychological Association), found that children's trust in voice assistants changes with age and with the type of question: as children grow older, they are more inclined to ask the device for facts, while still preferring a

human for personal questions. In a small experimental study by Erica H. Wojcik and colleagues, published in 2022 in the International Journal of Child-Computer Interaction (Elsevier), thirty children aged five to six preferred to request information from an Amazon Echo, but did not prefer it over a human when the two gave contradictory answers and they had to decide whom to believe. The sample is small and the device is a voice assistant, not a modern generative system, but the finding shows that being drawn to a device does not mean trusting it blindly. The risk is that generative systems can be wrong while sounding certain, and a child does not yet have the tools to check.

Relationship and reliance. In a nationally representative survey of 1,060 American teenagers aged 13 to 17, published by Common Sense Media in July 2025 under the title Talk, Trust, and Trade-Offs, 72% said they had tried AI companions at least once and 52% used them regularly. About a third of users said they had discussed serious matters with them instead of with real people, 31% found talking to them as satisfying as, or more satisfying than, talking to friends, and 24% said they had shared personal information such as their name, location or private secrets. The sample is American and the study is a survey, not an experiment, so its figures cannot simply be transferred to our context, but it reveals a trend.

Why are children drawn to a "digital companion"? Not because they do not love their parents, but because the bot offers something that is sometimes hard to get: instant attention, a non-judgmental reply, and a space to express themselves without fear of ridicule. A child may tell a bot what they would not tell their parents: "I feel like a failure," or "I'm scared of school," and receive a polite, reassuring answer. But the bot does not know the child's history, cannot see their face, does not notice changes in behaviour, and bears no real responsibility for their safety. There is also a question research has not yet answered: what does a child learn about friendship from a partner who never tires, never gets angry and tends to agree with them? Families do well to see a child's attachment to a digital companion as a window into their needs; a child who spends hours talking to a bot may first need a person who truly listens.

Privacy. In a conversation, a child may write about a quarrel with a friend, fear of an exam, or details about their family, school and home. Some apps keep conversations or use them to improve the service, depending on each platform's policy. Telling a child "don't talk to strangers" is not enough, because the bot may feel like a familiar friend rather than a stranger. The child should

understand that what they type may be stored and processed, and should not share anything they would not want others to see. Parents should review privacy settings, turn off conversation history where possible, and prefer apps designed for children and education.

Learning. A child who asks an app to do their entire homework loses the effort that builds understanding, while a child who uses it to explain a difficult idea, or to check a solution they attempted themselves, may benefit. The tool is the same; the difference is how it is used.

Internationally, UNESCO's Guidance for Generative AI in Education and Research (2023) recommends protecting data privacy and proposes 13 as the minimum age for independent use of generative AI platforms. In December 2025, UNICEF, through its Innocenti research office, released the third version of its Guidance on AI and Children, aimed mainly at governments and companies. It sets out ten requirements for child-centred AI, including safety by design, data protection and transparency, and explicitly addresses children's use of AI companions. These are guidance documents for protecting children's rights, not experiments proving that every harm happens to every user, and research on the long-term effects of generative chatbots on children is still in its early stages. But a lack of evidence does not justify dropping reasonable precautions.

Families can turn AI into an opportunity to build critical thinking. A father asks his son to try solving the problem first, then use the app to check the steps. A mother asks her daughter, after reading a story the app created: "Did you like the ending? How would you have written it?" Useful questions at home include: "Do you think this answer is correct?", "How can we check this information?" and "What do you think before we ask the app?" We want children to learn to use AI, not to give up thinking because of it.

11. The Emirati family between heritage and digital change

The Emirati family has strengths it can draw on in digital parenting: strong extended-family ties, the presence of grandparents, close kinship, family majlis gatherings, and community, heritage and sports activities. The family majlis was a space where children learned to listen, to speak with good manners, to respect elders, and to hear the experiences and stories of their grandparents.

But these strengths do not work automatically. A grandfather's presence at home does not guarantee that the child will listen to him, and a family sitting in one majlis does not mean its members are truly connecting. The goal is not to return to a life without technology, which is neither possible nor desirable, but to protect the human spaces that give the family its identity.

We may need to redesign some habits to fit children's lives today. Instead of asking a child to switch off and sit silently with the adults, we can involve them in a conversation suited to their age, let them help prepare the coffee and hospitality, or invite them to record a story their grandfather tells, using the phone itself. They could film a traditional recipe with their grandmother, document a story about life in the old UAE, or prepare a school project on the family's history. In this way technology goes from something that separates generations to something that brings them together. Families can also set aside weekly time to visit relatives or do a group activity away from devices.

It is also important to respect differences between children. Some need more support with transitions between activities, and some use assistive digital tools for learning or communication because of a disability or developmental difficulty; general rules should not deprive them of something they need. Fair parenting does not mean applying the same instructions rigidly to everyone, but setting clear limits that take age, abilities and circumstances into account. And Emirati values are preserved not by words alone, but by the daily practice a child sees at home.

12. Before we blame the child... what about our own use?

We may ask a child to put their phone down while we hold ours all day, or forbid devices at the table and then answer messages and calls during the same meal. Children do not learn from instructions alone; they watch their parents and draw conclusions about what is acceptable and normal.

As we have seen, technoference studies link parents' absorption in devices to children's behaviour, and the Mallawaarachchi review found that caregivers' device use during a child's routines was associated with weaker psychosocial outcomes. Parents are not expected to give up their devices or be available every moment, but to set aside times when their attention belongs to the family, and to explain to children the difference between necessary use for work and endless scrolling.

If we want a child to respect family time, we must respect it first. If we want them to read, it helps if they see us reading. If we want them to talk to us, we must give them real attention when they start. One simple habit is to say aloud what we are doing: "I'll reply to this message and then put the phone away," so the child sees that use is a conscious decision, not a constant habit. Perhaps the most important rule a family can agree on is this: when we sit together, we give each other the right to presence and attention. It should not be a punishment for children, but a family commitment that includes everyone.

13. Protecting children online: a responsibility beyond the home

In the United Arab Emirates, protecting children in the digital environment is no longer just parenting advice; it is now part of a national legal framework. Federal Law No. 3 of 2016 on Child Rights, known as "Wadeema's Law," is one of the legislative foundations for protecting children from neglect, abuse and exploitation.

Federal Decree-Law No. 26 of 2025 on Child Digital Safety followed, entering into force on 1 January 2026 with a one-year grace period for compliance. It applies to internet service providers and digital platforms operating in the UAE or targeting its users, including gaming, social media and live-streaming platforms; it sets obligations for those responsible for children's care as well; and it establishes a Child Digital Safety Council chaired by the Minister of Family. The decree-law prohibits platforms from giving children access to online commercial games involving betting and gambling.

In June 2026 the Cabinet issued Resolution No. 106 of 2026 on Regulating Children's Access to Social Media Platforms, the first detailed instrument issued under the decree-law. It sets 15 as the minimum age for social media use: children under 15 may not create, use or operate personal accounts, and parental consent is not a valid exemption. Those aged 15 to under 16 may use the platforms subject to enhanced protective measures. The resolution requires platforms to verify users' ages and to detect and disable violating accounts, gives them a twelve-month transition period, and makes parents and caregivers responsible for preventing children from using these platforms or getting around age checks.

It is important to distinguish between a child using the internet for learning or research under supervision and a child creating a personal account on a social media platform. The resolution regulates the second; it does not ban children from technology.

Internationally, the UN Committee on the Rights of the Child issued General Comment No. 25 in 2021 on children's rights in relation to the digital environment, affirming that children's rights must be respected, protected and fulfilled online too, including protection, privacy, education, participation and access to suitable information. Its importance lies in rejecting the false choice between protecting children and giving them opportunities to learn and participate: protection does not mean total isolation, and participation does not mean leaving children without safeguards.

All this confirms that protecting children is a shared responsibility that cannot be placed on the family alone, nor left to platforms without oversight and accountability. Platforms design interfaces, recommendation systems, notifications and data collection; schools shape the culture of use through digital homework, device policies and teaching verification skills; regulators set the safeguards. Schools can clarify when a device is necessary for learning and when it is optional, and include digital citizenship in the curriculum: respecting others, checking news, protecting data, dealing with cyberbullying and understanding the limits of AI. Teachers can notice early changes, such as a student falling asleep in class or withdrawing from friends, and open a calm line of communication with the family before a problem becomes a crisis. Society also needs safe, engaging educational content in Arabic, rather than leaving children with global content that does not always reflect their language and context.

Legislation lightens the burden on the home, but it does not replace it: the law regulates the platform, and the family is the one that knows its child.

14. Do we need a specific number of hours?

There is no single limit that suits every age and situation, but the early years have clear recommendations. The World Health Organization's 2019 guidelines on physical activity, sedentary behaviour and sleep for children under five recommend no sedentary screen time for infants under one year or for one-year-olds, and no more than one hour a day for children aged two to four, with less being better. WHO stresses that interactive non-screen activities, such as reading, storytelling, singing and puzzles, matter for child development.

The AAP's 2016 statement "Media and Young Minds" had recommended avoiding screens before 18 months except for video calls, limiting children aged two to five to one hour a day of high-quality content watched with a parent, and keeping screens out of bedrooms, mealtimes and the hour before

sleep. Its new 2026 statement replaced that guidance, shifting the focus from time limits alone to the whole digital environment: platform design, the child's relationship with caregivers, and the wider social context.

For older children and adolescents, what matters most is the quality of content and the effect of use on sleep, physical activity, learning and relationships. Use may be short but unsuitable for the child's age, or it may be a useful educational activity that takes longer. Real balance comes when technology sits within a day that includes enough sleep, movement, social interaction, and time to learn and rest. These recommendations are not a call to deprive children of technology, but to find a balance suited to their age and needs.

15. Ten realistic family rules: why they work and how to apply them without conflict

The rules most likely to last are the ones children understand, that the family applies to itself, and that leave the child some choice within clear limits. Families do not need complicated procedures or harsh decisions, but small, gradual steps that start from what they want to protect: sleep, mealtimes and conversation, movement and play, and homework.

1. Agree before you ban. Instead of announcing "from today, no phones," sit with the children to identify what is actually causing problems: is use delaying sleep? Affecting homework? Interrupting conversation at meals? Then write a family agreement together setting out when devices are used, where, and which apps are allowed at each age. Why it works: children stick more closely to rules they helped write, and a written agreement on the wall turns the argument from "me against you" into "what did we agree?" The AAP has long offered a "Family Media Plan" tool for this purpose, and the Canadian Paediatric Society recommends the same idea.

2. Screen-free places and times. The dinner table, the bedroom, the hour before bed, and some shared activities. Why it works: it targets what the evidence supports most strongly, namely sleep, and a rule tied to a place needs no daily debate; the child does not have to "resist" the device by willpower alone each time, because the environment itself reduces the chance of overuse. How to apply it without conflict: set up a "charging station" in the living room where everyone's devices spend the night, including the parents' phones. When the rule includes adults, it stops feeling like a punishment.

3. Predictable endings, not sudden ones. Many conflicts start when a device is snatched away mid-level or mid-video. Give a ten-minute warning, allow the current round to finish, and agree in advance on a number of videos rather than open-ended time. Say "After this round we'll stop the game and go to dinner," not "Turn it off now." Why it works: young children do not yet have full ability to switch suddenly from a fun activity to a less fun one, and the warning gives them time to prepare. Consistency matters more than strictness: a rule that changes with the adults' mood invites repeated conflict.

4. Parents first. We cannot ask a child to leave their phone at dinner while we answer work messages. Why it works: children copy what they see more than what they hear, and a family rule turns the issue from a parent–child struggle into a shared agreement, teaching children that attention to others is a skill to practise, not a slogan to recite. Necessary exceptions can be explained to the children.

5. Open conversation, with no punishment for honesty. Ask your child: "Show me what you're playing," "Who do you play with?", "What's the strangest thing you saw this week?", "Is there anything annoying in it? Do you have to buy things inside it?" This is the heart of the "enabling mediation" Livingstone and colleagues describe. The key condition is that a child's admission of an upsetting experience must not lead to the device being taken away immediately; a child punished for reporting learns to hide, and that is more dangerous than any content.

6. Watching and playing together. Play with your children sometimes and watch with them, then talk about what you saw: what did you think of what that character did? Did that really happen? What else could the player have done? Why it works: adult participation turns passive watching into conversation, the Mallawaarachchi review linked co-use with better cognitive outcomes in young children, and it gives parents first-hand understanding of what appeals to their child. A father who has sat for half an hour in front of his son's game has a stronger case when he later says a particular game is not suitable.

7. Quality before quantity, and transparency before surveillance. Ask: is the content suitable for their age according to its rating? Does it build, create or connect? Does it involve chats with strangers or in-app purchases? Set parental controls, chat and purchase settings to suit the child's age, and tell the child what you are checking and why rather than doing it secretly. As children grow, the family's role shifts from constant blocking to teaching judgment: how can they tell a video is exaggerating? What should they do if a stranger asks for their details?

8. Enjoyable alternatives the child chooses, not a void. Taking the device away without an alternative leaves the child facing a void from which they return to the screen insistently, because it is the most available and least effortful option. A good alternative offers what screens offer, fun, challenge and company, and is specific, close at hand and easy to start: sport with friends, drawing, a craft project, cooking together, a board game, or a visit to the grandparents where the child hears family stories and asks about them. Let the child help choose, so it does not feel like an extra punishment. Do not make the screen the only reward for every success or the only cure for every tantrum, since that raises its value in the child's mind. And remember that fifteen minutes of calm conversation or a walk together can make a child feel seen and heard, reducing their need to seek recognition in likes and digital rewards.

9. Rules specific to AI. Calmly teach the child four ideas: the app is not a friend or a secret-keeper; we do not share our full names, addresses, photos, passwords or family problems with it; we check its answers elsewhere because it can be confidently wrong; and we use it to understand, not to think for us. Most importantly, the child should know that serious problems belong with parents, a trusted teacher or a specialist, not a screen. Respecting each service's minimum age is part of this rule, as is not giving young children open-ended chat tools without supervision.

10. Independence that grows with age, and regular review. What suits a five-year-old does not suit a fifteen-year-old. Younger children need limits set by parents and more adult presence; teenagers need a bigger say in setting the rules, while the basics of safety, sleep and privacy stay fixed. The APA advisory recommends that monitoring decrease gradually as the adolescent matures and gains skills, while conversation continues. Make trust something the child earns through commitment, and review the agreement with them every month or at the start of each school term: what worked? What was hard? Is there a new app to discuss? Adjusting a rule is not abandoning the principle of limits; it is shaping them so they can actually be applied.

16. When the rule does not work the first time

Even fair rules may meet resistance. A child may agree to the arrangement and then object two days later, or get angry when the game ends despite knowing the time. This does not mean the conversation failed, nor that the family must back down. Self-control is not acquired by hearing

instructions; it takes time, repetition and support. Sometimes the rule itself is unrealistic: set at a time that does not fit the family's routine, introduced suddenly after unlimited use, or leaving the child no room for choice.

When a child refuses to switch off, a simple sequence helps: acknowledge their feelings, remind them of the agreement, then offer a limited choice that keeps the rule: "I know you want to keep going, but we agreed this is dinner time. Will you put the phone down yourself, or shall I help?" Once things calm down, ask what made stopping hard and think together about how to avoid the problem next time. If the agreement is broken, the consequence should be clear, proportionate and enforceable, with a new chance to comply, not an open-ended punishment.

What we should not do:

- Mock the child or call them "addicted" without a professional assessment.
- Confiscate the device as revenge rather than as an agreed step.
- Ban everything at once, with no alternatives or gradual steps.
- Rely entirely on monitoring software without conversation.
- Compare the child with siblings or peers.
- Ignore the feelings that may lie behind heavy use.
- Treat every digital mistake as a scandal.

The goal is for the child to trust their parents enough to say: "I saw something upsetting," "Someone I don't know messaged me," or "I can't stop playing this game." Those three sentences, said without fear, may protect a child better than any monitoring app. And in every case, the parent–child relationship should never become hostage to the child's success with screen rules.

It is not easy for parents to face daily pressure from adverts, apps, peers, school and the child at the same time, and many feel guilty for sometimes handing over a device so they can work or rest. That feeling is understandable, but it should not become paralysis. Parents do not need perfection, but conscious presence: they can make mistakes and correct them, hand over a device in a stressful moment and set a clearer rule the next day. Talking with other families going through the same experience, or with a school counsellor, can also help.

17. A seven-day family programme

A family that wants to change its digital habits can start with a simple one-week trial:

- **Day 1: Observe.** Notice how devices are used, without blame or punishment, and identify when use peaks.
- **Day 2: Talk.** Meet with the children and ask about the apps and games they love, and what they would like to change.
- **Day 3: Agree.** Set three clear rules, such as no phones at meals, protecting bedtime, and no age-inappropriate apps.
- **Day 4: Alternatives.** Organise a family activity chosen by the children, such as an outing, a group game or a visit to the grandparents.
- **Day 5: Share.** Choose an educational digital activity to do together, and talk about its benefits and limits.
- **Day 6: Lead by example.** Parents cut down their own phone use during family time, and the children notice that the rules apply to everyone.
- **Day 7: Review.** Ask: is there more conversation? Has bedtime improved? Have the children found activities they enjoy away from screens?

This trial should not become a competition or a source of pressure, but the start of more balanced family habits.

18. The Emirati Family Charter for Responsible Screen Use

A family can adopt a simple charter, written together by parents and children and displayed where everyone can see it:

- We use devices in ways that suit our ages and needs.
- We protect mealtimes, bedtime and family gatherings from unnecessary use.
- We choose suitable games and apps, and review safety and privacy settings.
- We do not share our personal information, photos or passwords with strangers or untrusted apps.
- We talk to the family if we come across upsetting content or a suspicious message, without fear of blame.
- We set aside time every day for movement, reading, play and social interaction.

- We check information, and we do not treat AI answers as always correct.
- We respect others online as we respect them in daily life.
- Adults and children alike follow the rules we agreed.
- We review the agreement regularly and update it when our needs change.

Our message to our children: We are not keeping technology from you, and we do not want to deprive you of chances to learn and have fun. We want to help you use it safely, and to make sure you still have chances to enjoy life beyond the screen. Devices are part of our lives, but they are not our whole life.

19. When should a family seek professional help?

Not every child who loves video games has a disorder, and not every argument about the phone signals a psychological problem. But some signs, if they persist, deserve closer attention:

- Clear, ongoing sleep problems or a marked drop in physical activity.
- Loss of interest in activities the child used to enjoy, or withdrawal from friends and family.
- A clear decline at school or repeated difficulties in social relationships.
- Intense, repeated outbursts when use is limited, or inability to keep to limits despite support.
- Continuing use despite obvious negative effects.
- Retreating into the screen in a way that looks like escape from sadness, anxiety or stress.

These signs alone do not mean a disorder is present, since they can have many causes, but if they persist they justify consulting a paediatrician, school counsellor or mental health professional. The best start is a calm conversation, not an accusation: "I've noticed you're not playing with your friends like before; is something bothering you?" works better than "You're addicted to your phone."

In cases of cyberbullying, blackmail, threats, sharing of private images or exposure to exploitative content, the priority is to protect the child, handle the situation calmly, keep appropriate evidence, and seek help from the competent authorities without delay. The child must know that telling their parents about a harmful experience will not lead to blame or humiliation; trust between child and parents is one of the strongest forms of protection.

A message to every father and mother

We may buy our children the latest devices, give them the best internet service and send them to excellent schools. But there are things technology cannot give them, however advanced it becomes. A phone cannot replace the warmth of talking with a father; a tablet cannot take the place of a mother's embrace; video games cannot give a child everything they learn from real play with siblings and friends; and artificial intelligence cannot substitute for the wisdom and human experience of a grandfather and grandmother.

This does not diminish the value of technology; it puts it in its proper place. Devices can be bought, replaced and upgraded, but the years of childhood pass and do not return. Every moment we listen to a child, every question we answer patiently, every activity we share, is a chance to build a relationship whose effects may last a lifetime.

Conclusion: Who holds a child's attention... and who shapes their values?

For all its disagreements, the evidence says something simpler than the noise of the debate suggests. The clearest harm does not come from the screen itself but from what it displaces: sleep, face-to-face conversation, free play and parents' attention. And the clearest benefit does not come from technology itself either, but from purposeful use accompanied by present adults. Between these two lies the family's responsibility, which is more about organising and accompanying than about forbidding.

Our children's childhood will not return to a time without devices, and that should not be our goal. But accepting this reality does not mean giving up the family's role in raising them. A child needs digital knowledge, and alongside it the ability to wait, to think independently, to respect others, to understand their feelings, and to tell truth from misinformation. They need parents they can ask without fear, and times when notifications do not compete with their family's attention.

A father may not know every detail of the game his son loves, but he can ask what draws him to it. A mother may not be able to follow every new app, but she can build a relationship that makes her daughter tell her when something bothers her. A grandfather cannot compete with the speed of digital content, but he can give his grandchildren what algorithms cannot: human experience, family memory and a sense of belonging.

Artificial intelligence raises the bar of this responsibility, because it is the first technology to enter the home with a voice that converses, advises and keeps company. The UAE's new laws and the guidance of international organisations place part of the burden on platforms, which is necessary, but no law sits with a child at dinner, and no algorithm asks about their day and waits for the answer.

So let us return to the question we began with: who is raising our children today… us or the screens? The honest answer is that screens raise our children to the extent that we leave them time empty of our presence. And the more useful question for every father, mother and educator is not "how many hours does my child spend in front of a screen?" but: how many hours does my child find me fully present, with all my attention?

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Editorial note: The family scenes in this article are illustrative, imagined examples, not documented cases of specific families. The article is for awareness and does not replace specialist medical or psychological assessment where needed.

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