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How to cut your kids' cell phone addiction

by Kelly Wallace, Cnn • Sept. 23, 2013 • 6 min read • [original](#)

- Parents around the country are concerned kids are addicted to cell phones
- Viral video showing adults' addiction to devices has more than 23 million views
- Moms and dads offer innovative ways to limit kids' time on cell phones
- Experts say parents first need to embrace technology, not punish kids with it

There is one image I could not get out of my mind after spending a recent weekend with close family friends, and that is the image of their kids, ages 10 and 13, on their devices. All weekend. All the time.

My girls, ages 5 and 7, don't have phones but that doesn't mean they're not fascinated with them. In fact, my 5-year-old, who would live on an iPhone or iPod if she had one, was constantly looking over the older kids' shoulders as they played games or checked Instagram.

So when a colleague sent around [this YouTube video](#), which has now been seen more than 23 million times, offering a sad commentary on just how addicted we grown-ups are to our digital devices (there's now a [facility in the United States to treat Internet addiction!](#)), we wondered how addicted our kids are, too.

In conversations with moms and dads across the country, in response to our request on [CNN's Facebook page](#), we heard growing concerns about kids seemingly tied to their digital devices, but also some innovative ideas about ways to cut the cord.

Cutting the cord

Jennifer Alsip of Robinson, Texas, reached her limit, she said, after her 17-year-old couldn't put her phone down.

"It's like she couldn't be away from it," said Alsip, a single mom of two, who said she couldn't afford to pay the \$15 or \$30 extra every month when her daughter went over her monthly data plan.

Alsip gave her daughter a warning: Either "cool it" with the nonstop phone connection or she would take the phone away. Then she realized she could do something else: cut off the Internet on her daughter's phone once she reached her maximum data allotment.

"She knows she has a limit so she stays off of it more," said Alsip, who said the upside is more family time. "We're eating dinner with no phone right next to you with notifications coming (in) and her picking it up to see, 'Oh, Harry Styles did this,'" Alsip said of the One Direction star, laughing.

Melissa Barrios, a mom of two in Ventura, California, pays an extra \$5 a month for a special program that allows her to shut off her 13-year-old daughter's phone from 9 p.m. to 7 a.m.

"At first, it was kind of weird to her, because there's always this, 'Well, my friends' parents don't do that.' But it always goes back to the same thing. 'Well, we're not your friends' parents. We're your parents.'"

[Photos: Our mobile 'addiction'](#)

A novel way to 'be present'

Mark Love, a woodworker just outside Austin, Texas, whose 12-year-old has a phone, was lamenting with a close friend about how technology had changed the dynamic at their dinner table, not just for the kids but for the adults, as well.

It was that conversation -- tied with a need to make his friend a birthday present -- that led him to create the "Be Present" box two months ago. It's a small, wooden, carefully crafted box, etched with very clear directions about how you can pack your technology away. Inside it says, "1. Insert Phone. 2. Close Lid." and the cover of the box says, "3. Be Present."

Love, a father of two, posted a picture of his creation on his Facebook page and went to bed. "I woke up the next morning and it had gotten tens of thousands of likes and shares and it has gone completely bananas all over the world," said Love, who heard from people as far away as Australia, Denmark and Great Britain.



The boxes, which sell for \$60 each (Love wanted to create a "pretty, well-made ... piece of art," which people would want to have sitting out in their homes), have led to a new dynamic at his dinner table, as his kids fight over who can put their device inside first.

"The deal is until it's over, you don't get it out and it has actually, I think, made a big difference," Love said. "We have to actually talk to each other again and that goes for my wife and I, too. It's not just the kids."

All phones on the table -- or else!

Amanda Humphreys, 19, said she and her friends realized at a dinner three months ago just how addicted they are to their phones.

After everyone was posting on Facebook throughout the dinner and nobody was paying attention to each other, a friend came up with an intriguing idea -- pile the phones in the middle of the table during the meal and whoever touches or grabs their phone has to pay the tab.

"We all looked at each other in kind of this moment of panic but we all went along with it," said Humphreys, who described herself as "one of those people" who got into a car accident a year ago because of texting while driving.

She said the new phone policy means real conversations about real things.

"A major thing is our topic of conversation is no longer what someone else posted on Facebook, which it often would be," said Humphreys, who lives in Sussex County, New Jersey. "I think we all kind of realized we didn't know what to talk about besides, 'Oh, did you see so and so's photo on Instagram?' We actually, I think, have a better idea of what's going on in each other's lives and it's really nice."

[Smartphone danger: Distracted parenting](#)

A pledge to take a 'tech time-out'

Foresters, a fraternal benefit society providing life insurance for its members, came up with the idea for a so-called "[tech timeout](#)" after hearing from member families concerned about technology addiction.

The organization created a [comical YouTube video](#), which has been seen more than 300,000 times, encouraging people to pledge to take an hour a day when they put their technology away. Almost 9,000 people have taken [the pledge](#) so far.

"We all can relate," said Kasia Czarski, Foresters' senior vice president and chief membership and marketing officer, and a mom of a 13- and 16-year-old who helped launch the initiative. "We grapple with this in our family. How do we create family togetherness yet how do we recognize this is a new world that is important to our kids? You can't just ... shut it off. This is here to stay."

'Best. Idea. Ever.'

The best way to deal with the issue of children addicted to cell phones, said Ann Brown, a single mom of a 17-year-old son in Cleveland, is to not give them one in the first place.

That's right. Her 17-year-old does not have a cell phone, which led me to ask how she managed to pull off that trick. Doesn't every teen in the country want one?

"It's because I'm the mom and I'm the boss," Brown said with a chuckle. She said her son is never texting under the dinner table or checking e-mails at a restaurant -- and can actually have a conversation with adults.

"It comes back to a backbone. I'm the parent. When I say 'no,' no means no," Brown said. "And I think there are so many parents these days that they don't want to deal with that kind of thing but they give in and you just can't give in as a parent because then what happens next? They know they can get away with whatever."

Opinion: A day without a cell phone

Best advice to parents?

Sandra Bond Chapman, author of the book "Make Your Brain Smarter" and founder and chief director of the [Center for BrainHealth](#) at the University of Texas at Dallas, said parents who are concerned about their kids'

dependence on digital devices should first embrace the technology and not punish them with it.

Second, she suggests challenging children to do "interval training" where they spend 30 minutes doing homework without any form of disruption from technology -- and during the next 30 minutes of homework, they are allowed to check their phones or other devices. (You could also try 15 minutes if you can't quite get your kid away from the phone for 30!)

When she does this experiment with teens, she said they are "blown away" by how much better they do when they are not distracted by technology. "What they see is they are able to complete their homework almost in a quarter of the time it takes them," Chapman said. "They see that they learn better the next day when they're doing tests or trying to remember it."

Thankfully, the phone conundrum -- Do I give my kid one? At what age? What are the ground rules? -- won't be an issue in my household for a few more years, but I'm not wasting any time. I already ordered a couple of Mark Love's "Be Present" boxes -- one for our household and another for my close family friends.

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