



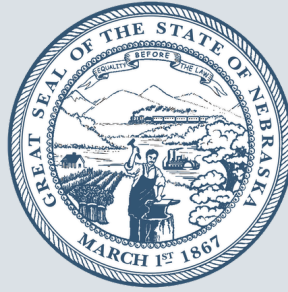
Parenting in the Digital Age

Nebraska Attorney General's Office

Nebraska Attorney General's Office

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Dear Nebraska Parents,

Nebraska has long been known for strong families, supportive communities, and neighbors who take the time to care for one another. As our world becomes more digitally connected, those same values must also guide how we protect our children online. The internet gives young people remarkable opportunities to learn, communicate, and explore new interests, but parents should be aware of the associated risks.

Individuals who intend to harm or deceive others online rarely appear threatening at first. Many present themselves as friendly peers, exciting opportunities, or ordinary forms of entertainment. Because children and teens are often curious and naturally trusting, they may not recognize when someone online does not have good intentions.

Awareness and open communication are two of the most effective ways to keep children safe online. Learning about online risks and having regular conversations with your children about their digital activities can make a real difference.

If you have questions or concerns about online safety, please contact our office at (402) 471-2785, and we will be glad to help.

Sincerely,

Nebraska Attorney General's Office



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Parents' Role in the Digital Age

Parenting has always come with challenges, but raising children in the digital age requires parents to navigate a world unknown to previous generations. Smartphones, social media, gaming platforms, and artificial intelligence can create opportunities for learning and connection, but they also expose children to risks ranging from cyberbullying and exploitation to unhealthy screen habits and harmful content.

Parents do not need to be technology experts to help protect their children online. Staying engaged, setting healthy boundaries, and maintaining open communication all make a meaningful difference. This guide provides practical information and tools to help families use technology safely, intentionally, and responsibly.



What Kids Are Experiencing

37% of kids say **social media drama made them feel stressed or worried** in the past six months.

56% of kids **feel very or somewhat overwhelmed** by the amount of information online.

62% of surveyed kids **wish they could “flip the script” and take their parents’ phones away.**

Kids report that **technology use is the number one reason they fight with their parents.**

63% of kids **say they have intentionally avoided group chats**, social media, or the news to feel less stressed.

56% of kids **have felt excluded** by friends for not being in the same online groups or on the same social media platforms.

Source: Aura Parents State of the Youth Reports, 2025 and 2026

How to Respond to What Kids Experience

- Model healthy screen time habits for your children by intentionally interacting with them away from screens.
- Ask open-ended questions and listen fully. Having regular, calm discussions about online safety will make it easier for your child to come to you when there is a problem.
- Reassure your child that the goal is support, not punishment. Make it clear that coming to you won't automatically result in losing their phone or privileges.
- Avoid minimizing or oversimplifying. Phrases like “just ignore it” or “it's not a big deal” can quickly shut down the conversation.
- Invite them to teach you. Ask them to explain platforms, group chats, trends, or pressures, so they feel understood rather than judged.

Effects of Screen Time on Kids



Screen Time Is Increasing and Starts Early

- Screen use begins early and increases rapidly with age. By the teenage years, many children spend more time daily on entertainment screens than they do exercising, reading, or talking face-to-face with family and friends.

Source: Department of Health and Human Services

Screen Time Can Disrupt Sleep and Daily Routines

- Screen immersion drives sleep deprivation, sedentary behavior, youth obesity, and poor cardiovascular habits.
- Screen use—especially at night—is linked to shorter sleep, daytime exhaustion, difficulty concentrating, and increased irritability in children and teens. Studies have found that children who sleep near phones or other screens consistently get less sleep than their peers.

Source: Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, Common Sense Media, and American College of Pediatricians

Try This with Your Family

- Implement phone-free school days and device-free family nights.
- Consider flip phones and smartwatches instead of smartphones.
- Encourage books, movies, and long-form content that requires sustained concentration and attention.

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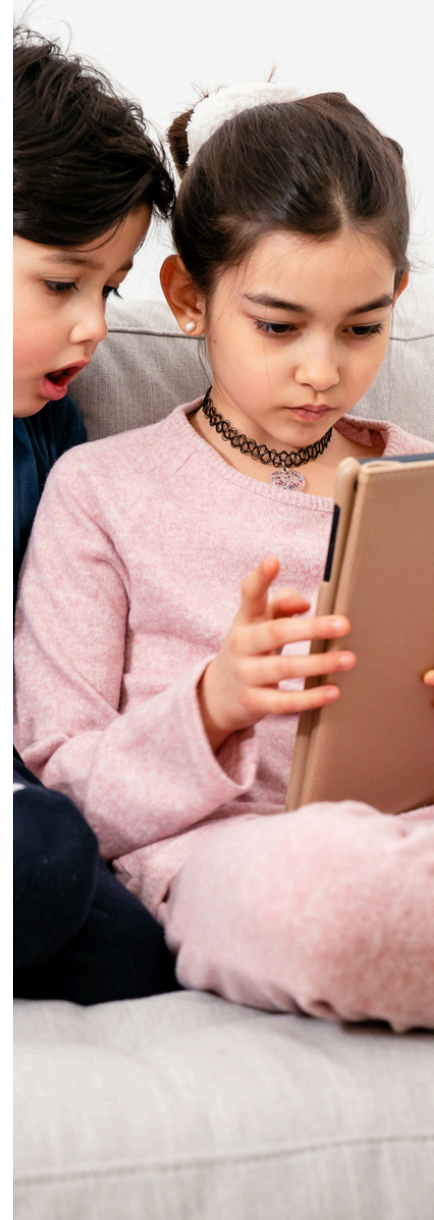
Screen Time Can Affect Emotional and Social Health

- Early childhood screen exposure is linked to poorer language outcomes, attention difficulties, and altered brain structures.
- Excessive screen use can significantly harm children's social and emotional health.
- Heavy screen use, especially on social media, is directly linked to clinical depression, anxiety, cyberbullying, body dissatisfaction, and self-harm risk.

Screens Are Often Used for Emotional Regulation or Distraction

- Parents often use screens to help kids calm down, eat, or sleep. Unfortunately, this may limit the development of essential self-management and resilience skills.
- Relying on devices as emotional regulators can create a dangerous dependency, one that displaces vital human interactions and prevents children from building natural, lifelong self-regulation and coping strategies.

Source: Office of the U.S. Surgeon General and Common Sense Media



Did You Know?

Screen time can be especially harmful to the developing brains of babies and toddlers. The Office of the U.S. Surgeon General does not recommend any screen time for children under 18 months of age.

Effects of Social Media on Kids



Platform Design and Usage:

- Social media algorithms encourage compulsive use
- Endless scrolling keeps youth absorbed for long periods
- Push notifications encourage frequent checking
- User attention is sold for profit by social media companies
- Researchers have observed parallels between excessive social media use and behavioral addiction patterns, for example, at least one in three girls aged 11-15 report feeling “addicted” to a social media platform

Mental Health Impacts:

- Increased anxiety and depression in teens
- Increased suicidal thoughts (especially among girls)
- Body-image issues
- Increased eating disorder risk
- Lower self-esteem
- Decreased life satisfaction during puberty
- Mood changes or irritability
- Reduced memory recall

Physical Health Impacts:

- Sleep disruption
- Nearsightedness
- Increased sedentary behavior and higher rates of obesity

Source: Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, 2026

Social media platforms are designed to keep children constantly absorbed and returning for more. This not only affects their ability to learn both inside and outside the classroom but also impacts the quality of their relationships. In many ways, it replaces genuine, authentic human connection with a superficial and isolating alternative.

Continued

Content Exposure Risks:

- Exposure to sexually explicit material
- Exposure to violent or disturbing content
- Access to inappropriate material at very young ages
- Inadequate parental controls

Safety Risks:

- Contact between minors and unknown adults
- Online grooming
- Exploitation in chat rooms
- Sextortion
- Inadequate parental controls

Social & Emotional Effects:

- Reduced deep thinking and concentration, impacting focus and presence in interpersonal settings with family, friends, romantic relationships, work, and school
- Amplified harassment through public and anonymous bullying online
- Pressure to present a “perfect” online image
- False sense of connection through superficial interactions with followers rather than personal relationships
- Increased need for external approval through followers, likes, and online comparison



Source: Office of the U.S. Surgeon General, 2026

Steps to Consider

- Restrict or avoid social media during early adolescent brain development, ideally until age 15–16.
- Set screen time limits for social media apps to prevent compulsive use.
- Limit screen use in private areas.
- Enable restrictions on your child’s ability to download apps or access web pages.



Family Discussion Questions

for Consideration in Creating Guidelines

Prepare in Advance

Do you want your children to ask you for permission before going online or downloading new apps?

Privacy

Do you want to keep your children's profiles private? How much personal information will you allow your child to share?

Communication

Do you want to approve your child's contacts, followers, or friends list for direct messaging?

Location

Do you want to allow your child to use their devices in private areas, such as bedrooms and bathrooms?

Set Limits

Do you want to limit your child's screen time? If so, how much?

Apps

Do you want to allow apps that include direct messaging, group chats, disappearing messages, or communications with strangers?

Social Media

Do you want to allow your children to use social media? Which platforms are you comfortable allowing your child to use?

Supervision

Do you want your child to use devices when unsupervised?

Protecting your child online will be an ongoing process. Consider boundaries like no phones in bedrooms at night and shared passcodes with parents. Even good kids, as well as adults, can get swept up in online chaos. Have frequent, regular conversations with your child about online safety.



Conversation Starters for Parents in Your Community

- ☒ How can we, as parents, create consistent expectations when our children are together at each other's homes?
- ☒ How have you approached online safety with your family? Have you experienced any concerns?
- ☒ Are you checking all devices? (Home computers, game consoles, watches, etc.)
- ☒ How do you create a home environment where your child feels comfortable telling you when something goes wrong online?
- ☒ What rules around phones, apps, gaming, and social media have worked well for your family?
- ☒ How much privacy do you allow your children online, and how do you monitor their activity?
- ☒ What apps, parental controls, or safety tools have you found most helpful—and what limitations have you encountered?
- ☒ What can we do as a community of parents to reduce the risk of cyberbullying, sextortion, grooming, and online exploitation?

Internet access is no longer limited to phones and computers. Many gaming systems, smart TVs, watches, tablets, and other connected devices allow children to browse the internet, communicate with others, and access content—often with fewer parental controls and less supervision.

Cyberbullying

Cyberbullying can severely affect a child's self-esteem. Ask your child to think of a safe person to talk to if they experience online bullying. Check with your child's school to learn more about its cyberbullying policies and procedures.

Signs of Cyberbullying

- Threatening, cruel, or repeated harassment online, including messages encouraging self-harm.
- Suddenly deleting accounts, creating new accounts, or using fake or impersonation accounts.
- Posting or sharing hurtful, embarrassing, or inappropriate comments, photos, or videos about someone.
- Noticeable increases or decreases in device or social media use.
- Emotional reactions after being online, such as anger, anxiety, embarrassment, or withdrawal.
- Hiding screens, acting secretive online, or avoiding conversations about online activity.
- Changes in mood, friendships, school performance, or interest in normal activities.

Steps You Can Take

- Encourage your child not to respond to bullying messages or retaliate online.
- Save screenshots, messages, usernames, and other evidence before blocking or reporting accounts.
- Block, mute, and report abusive users or fake accounts to the platform.
- Contact your child's school if the bullying involves classmates or affects their safety or education.
- Talk with your child about being an "upstander" by supporting peers who are being bullied online.
- Contact law enforcement if you observe cyberbullying that includes threats of self-harm or threats to harm others.



What Does Grooming Look Like?

Online grooming occurs when an individual builds trust and an emotional connection with a child for the purpose of manipulation, exploitation, or sexual abuse. Grooming often happens gradually and can look harmless at first, which is why it is important to recognize the warning signs.

What Are Warning Signs?

- Sudden secrecy about online activity, texting, or a particular person
- Withdrawal, anxiety, depression, or unusual emotional reactions
- Increased defensiveness when asked about friends or communications
- Significant changes in sleep, appetite, or school performance
- Excessive attention from an older teen or adult
- The child describing a relationship as a “special secret”
- Attempts by the individual to isolate the child from family or friends
- The individual encouraging the child to break family rules or keep things hidden
- The child feeling responsible for the other person’s happiness
- Statements such as “They understand me better than anyone else”
- Fear of upsetting or disappointing the person
- The child becoming protective of the person’s behavior despite concerns
- Sudden signs of self-harm



Sextortion:

What You Need to Know

Sextortion is a form of online exploitation in which an offender tricks or coerces a teen into sending sexual images or videos and then threatens to share them unless the teen sends more content or money. According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation, many recent cases involve “financial sextortion,” where offenders pose as peers or romantic interests on social media or gaming platforms before making threats. While anyone can be targeted, the FBI reports that many recent victims have been teen boys ages 14–17, though girls are also affected.

The impact can be severe. Shame and fear often keep teens from telling parents, which gives offenders more control. The FBI warns that paying money or complying with demands rarely stops the exploitation and can lead to further threats. Cases have been linked to intense emotional distress and, in some instances, suicide.

How to Report

- Call the Omaha FBI Field Office at (402) 493-8688. This is the primary reporting system for online child sexual exploitation.
- Contact your local police department or sheriff's office.
- Request image removal through TakeItDown.NCMEC.org, which helps prevent the online distribution of certain intimate images involving minors.



Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence (AI) is advancing at a rapid pace. New tools appear faster than most parents, schools, or regulators can fully evaluate them. That speed creates uncertainty, especially around child safety.

Children may interact with AI as though it were a friend, a teacher, or an authority figure. AI can feel conversational, helpful, and even emotionally responsive, which can blur important boundaries. According to Common Sense Media, nearly one in four kids ages 9-17 use AI daily.

AI does not understand truth, intent, empathy, or consequences the way people do. It predicts language based on data, meaning it can be confidently wrong or subtly biased.

There are growing concerns about AI and learning. AI tools can unintentionally weaken the development of critical thinking and writing skills when they replace essential cognitive work. If students rely on AI too early or too often, they may bypass the struggle that builds real understanding. When AI does too much of the work, problem-solving abilities and creativity can erode over time.

Personal details, school information, or emotional disclosures may be captured by systems that youth do not fully control or understand. Additionally, AI can mimic voices, alter photos, and create content involving your child that you would not want created or shared, including explicit content.

The more information available online about a child, the more material there is that could potentially be misused or manipulated. Parents should be mindful about what is shared about children online.

AI-Generated Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM)

What Is CSAM?

- CSAM includes any sexually explicit images or videos involving minors. This is illegal under U.S. law because it represents the sexual abuse and exploitation of children — it's not just inappropriate content, but evidence of a crime.
- CSAM harms children every time images are viewed or shared. Even after removal, distribution online can continue indefinitely, re-traumatizing victims.
- Parents should know that CSAM is widespread online, including on social media, messaging apps, games, and file-sharing platforms, and often circulates via deep links and encrypted channels.

AI-Generated CSAM: What Makes It Different?

- AI tools can now create highly realistic, sexually explicit images of children. The FBI explicitly warns that creating, distributing, or possessing AI-generated CSAM is illegal, even if no real child was present during creation.
- AI doesn't make this content "less harmful." According to NCMEC, even computer-generated images or deepfakes (where an innocent photo is transformed into abusive imagery) are classified as CSAM and carry real legal and emotional consequences.
- AI-generated CSAM can be used to exploit and blackmail kids. Some offenders will generate or manipulate images of real children into abusive material to coerce victims or cause psychological harm.

Did You Know?

The Nebraska Attorney General's Office worked in partnership with the Nebraska Legislature to outlaw and criminalize the use of AI to generate CSAM.



Warning Signs of Risky Apps

- Apps with disappearing messages or photos.
- Apps that allow open communication between adults and children.
- No parental controls or insufficient controls.
- Security concerns that allow full access to your child's phone, texts, and photos.
- Apps that share your child's location with others outside the home.
- Any app with explicit content.
- Hidden storage apps: These apps may have deceptive-looking thumbnails (for example, a hidden-photo app may look like a calculator or notepad until it is opened).

Tips to Protect Kids

- If your child uses social media, look at their feed or their "for you" page. This is a good indication of the type of content that they regularly consume.
- Consider not allowing phones in bedrooms or private spaces.
- Have regular conversations with your child about online safety.
- Set up parental controls on your child's phone to prevent them from downloading new apps.



Settings & Passwords

Set Up Parental Controls

Choose parental controls that fit your family. Use built-in iOS or Android tools (Apple Family Sharing, Google Family Link) and the safety menus that most apps have. Additionally, consider purchasing parental control software to block, filter, and monitor device activity.

Key Settings to Review:

- Authentication: Use strong passwords and two-factor authentication
- Location sharing: Turn off, except for family “Find My” device tracking or trusted apps.
- Privacy: Give apps only the permissions they need. Limit access to camera, contacts, location, microphone, and storage.
- Social media: Set accounts to private; limit who can follow or message your child.
- Content filters: Enable age-appropriate filtering.
- Purchase restrictions: Apple Family Sharing “Ask to Buy” and Google Family Link “Purchase Approvals.”

Setting Passwords:

Create passwords that are long and strong, using at least 12 characters and a combination of numbers, letters, and symbols.

Using a special character other than an exclamation point can make a password harder to crack.

Two-factor authentication (2FA) is a critical security measure because it requires more than just a password to log in to an account. According to the Federal Trade Commission, even if a hacker steals your password, they are unlikely to access your account without that second piece of verification.

Family Sharing

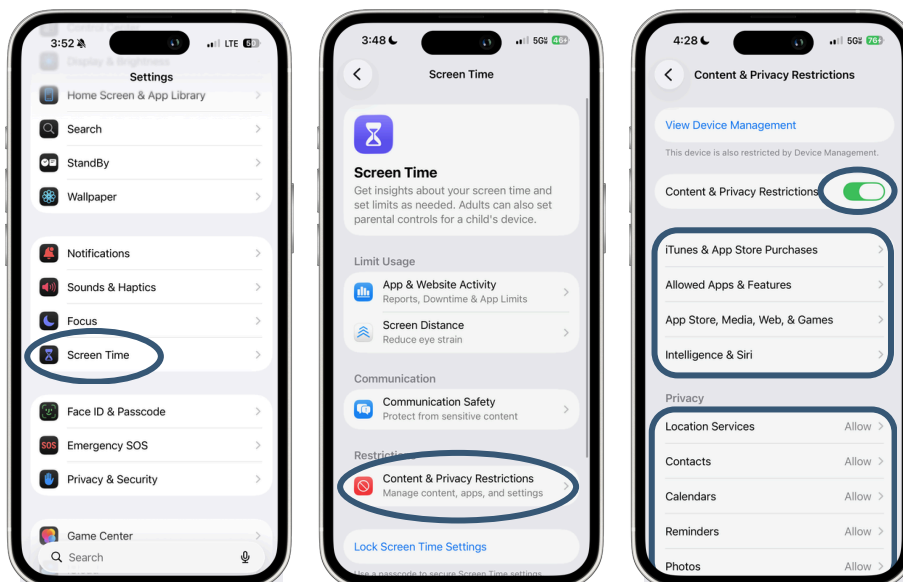
iPhone



- Open the Settings app on the parent's phone.
- Tap your name.
- Tap Family, then tap Continue.
- Follow the on-screen instructions to set up your family and invite your family members.

Content & Privacy

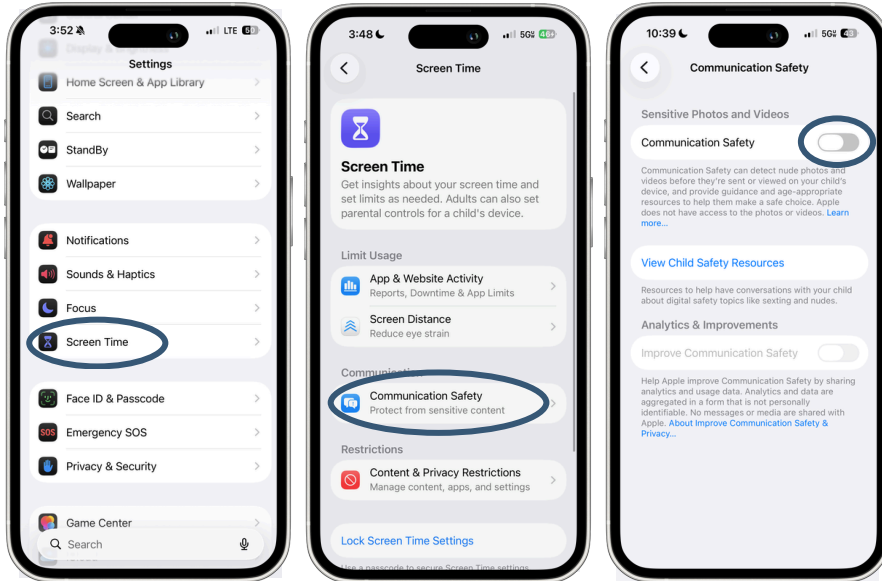
iPhone



- Open Settings, scroll down.
- Tap Screen Time.
- Under Family, tap your child's name.
- Tap Content & Privacy Restrictions.
- Toggle on Content and Privacy Restrictions.
- Set up specific restrictions on common activities, such as app store purchases, web content, explicit media, privacy, and account changes, in the sections below.
- Tap "Lock Screen Time Settings" and set your passcode to prevent your child from changing the settings.

Child Safety

iPhone



- Open Settings, scroll down.
- Tap Screen Time.
- Tap Communication Safety.
- Toggle on Communication Safety and View Child Safety Resources.

Screen Time

iPhone



- Open Settings, scroll down.
- Tap Screen Time.
- Tap App & Website Activity.
- Toggle on App & Website Activity.
- Use the “Limit Usage” settings to set limits.
- **Downtime:** Schedule time when only the apps you allow are accessible.
- **App Limits:** Set time limits for specific apps or categories.
- **Always Allowed:** Choose apps to allow at all times, regardless of other limits.
- **Screen Distance:** Sends alerts when the device is held close to the face.

Find Hidden Apps

iPhone



- Open Settings.
- Scroll down and tap “Apps.”
- Scroll to the bottom of the apps list to find “Hidden Apps.”

Find Hidden Photos

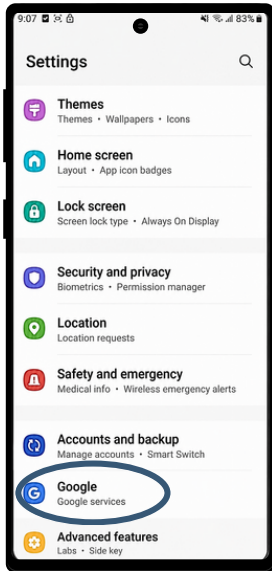
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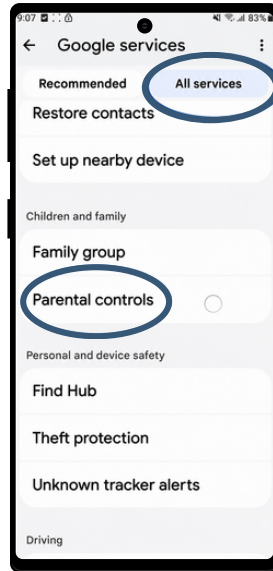
- Open Photos.
- Tap on the “Collections” tab at the bottom of the app and scroll down to find “Hidden.”

Parental Controls

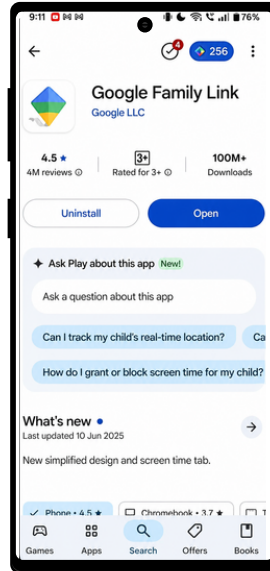
Android



Child's Phone



Child's Phone

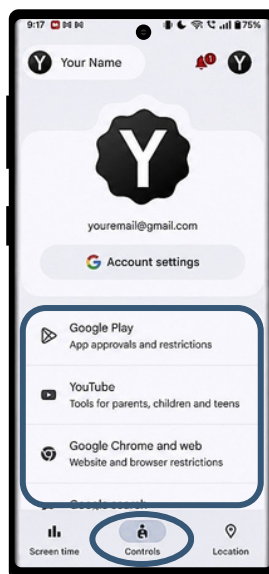
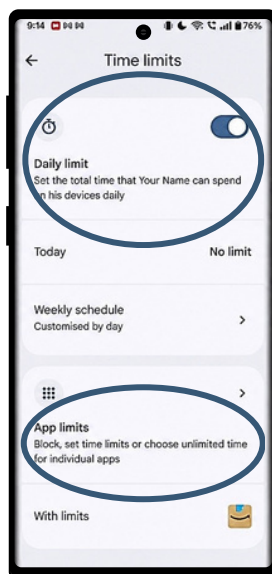
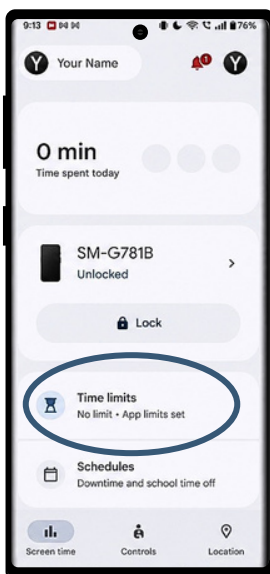


Parent's Phone

- Open Settings on the child's phone.
- Tap on "Google" (or "Digital Wellbeing" on some versions).
- Tap "All services" and scroll down to "Parental controls."
- Follow the instructions to sign in to the child and parent Google Accounts.
- On the parents' phone, install the Google Family Link app.
- Sign in with the parent's account.

Screen Time

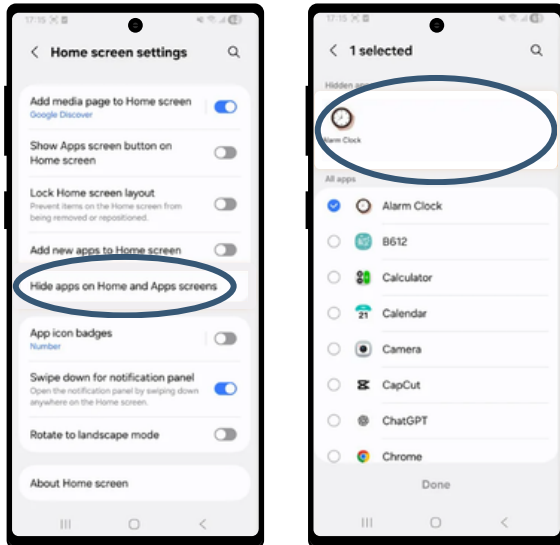
Android



- On the parent's phone, open the Google Family Link app and tap "Time Limits."
- Set a "Daily limit" for the phone, or "App limits" for individual apps.
- Use the "Limit Usage" settings to set limits.
- Tap "Controls" in the bottom bar.
- Change content restrictions, filters, and parental controls for Google apps.

Find Hidden Apps

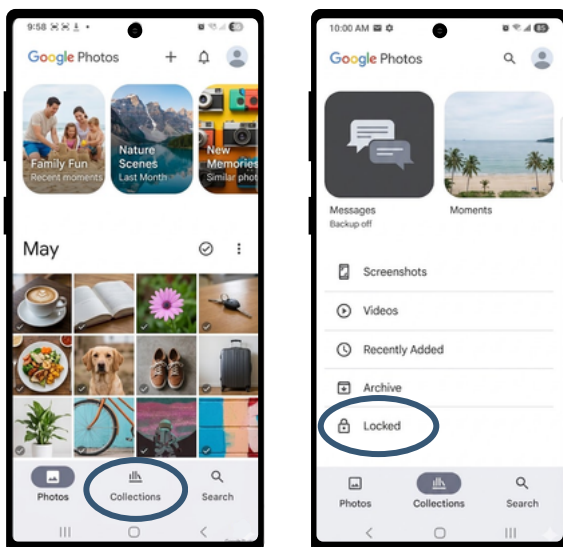
Android



- Open Settings.
- Tap “Home Screen.”
- Scroll down and tap “Hide apps on Home and Apps screens.”
- Hidden apps will appear in the “Hidden apps” box.

Find Hidden Photos

Android



- If you use Google Photos, open the app.
- Tap on the “Collections” tab at the bottom of the app and scroll down to find the “Locked” folder.

Books to Consider



***The Anxious Generation* - Jonathan Haidt**

Discusses why adolescent mental health collapsed at the same time and in the same way across so many countries in the early 2010s, and what we can do to reverse these alarming trends, including:

- No smartphones before high school
- No social media before 16
- Phone-free schools, from bell to bell
- More independence, free play, and responsibility in the real world

***The Tech Exit* - Clare Morell**

Maps a doable pathway to freedom from digital technology for families, local communities, and society. Drawing on dozens of interviews with experts and with families who have gone tech-free, as well as Morell's own work as a policy expert, *The Tech Exit* shows how digital technology is anything but necessary for children to live happy, healthy, and socially full lives.

***1000 Hours Outside* - Ginny Yurich**

Modern childhood has become over-scheduled and screen-heavy, and unstructured outdoor play helps children develop:

- Creativity
- Independence
- Resilience
- Physical and mental health

Questions?

Call us at (402) 471-2785. If you would like to hear more, visit ProtectTheGoodLife.Nebraska.gov.

Online Safety Resources



Abduction Prevention Child Safety Program..... MissingKids.org/education/kidsmartz

Cyberbullying..... StopBullying.gov

How to Use Parental Controls to Keep Your Kid Safe..... FTC.gov

National Center for Missing and Exploited Children..... NCMEC.org

Online Safety Education Program MissingKids.org/netsmartz/home

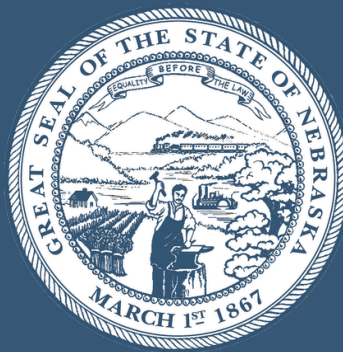
Online Safety Tips..... StopThinkConnect.org

Parents, Caregivers, & Teachers Protecting Your Kids... FBI.gov

Removal of Explicit Pictures TakeltDown.NCMEC.org

Report Child Online Sexual Exploitation..... CyberTipline.org





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