

What age should your child own a smartphone?

BY RITAH MUKASA

Betty (second name withheld) a mother of four, is under pressure. Her 14-year-old daughter throws tantrums at every whim. She wants her own smartphone or laptop. But Betty insists she must wait, until she is 18. Then, perhaps, she will be able to navigate the Internet on her own. Betty offered to share her phone with her daughter, but she rejected it, saying she needs her privacy. She wants to catch up with her friends on WhatsApp, Instagram and Tiktok without restrictions. And that, everyone in her class is online apart from her. "This girl keeps pushing me to the wall, but I am determined not to yield to her pressure," Betty says.

From her experience as a teacher for 15 years, she says: "A childhood ends when you give your child access to the Internet." They are exposed to pornography, violence and cyber bullying among other dangers," she says.

Violet Namazzi, a medical doctor, agrees. She, too, doesn't believe in giving children smart

phones. Her daughters: Divine Ruth Kawuki 7 and Daniella Ketra Kawuki 9, are musicians. They have social media accounts, but she manages them. She also monitors how they use their tablets. They watch only YouTube videos for two hours before they go to bed. During the day, they do chores, watch cartoons on TV and play.

IT'S NOT JUST THE AGE, BUT RESPONSIBILITY

Many parents are under pressure to provide smart phones and laptops to their children. Dr Godfrey Siu, a senior lecturer at Makerere University Child Health and Development Centre says, some parents worry that their child will feel out of place around kids who own these gadgets.

- For this, nowadays, children as young as six years, own smartphones and can freely access the unfiltered internet and social media. Others struggle with the question: "What is the right age to give my child a phone?" But to this, Siu doesn't give a definitive



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answer because; "there is no one-size-fits-all solution." He says you cannot determine based on age only, but also the responsibility and purpose as well. First ask yourself questions; "does this child really need a smartphone, tablet, laptop or just a button phone? Is it going to serve a genuine need or they just want to stay in touch with friends? Is she or he responsible enough to manage the internet dangers?

Siu says too much screen time may affect brain development; therefore, he advises giving phones to only children above 13 years.

DELAY FOR AS LONG AS POSSIBLE

While the gadgets help in learning, keeping up with friends and developing essential digital skills, Dickson Tumuramye, a parenting coach cautions against the dangers including addiction, cyber bullying

and exposure to harmful content.

For that, he suggests delaying phone access for as long as possible. This will allow children to build confidence and strong relationships away from the digital streets. For him, 15 years is a reasonable age because then, the child is fairly mature to understand the potential risks of social media when you talk about them. When you give your child a smartphone, Tumuramye warns: "You give them full access to adult content and social media bullies, pedophiles and scammers."

If you decide to give your child a phone, Siu recommends setting regulations.

Also, have a conversation with them on the potential risks. In the same way, you should know their password, and they should be aware that you have the right to take away the phone if they misuse it.

It's also important to limit their screen time according to Tumuramye. For example, they can have their phones for three hours after lunch.