



SMARTER START TOOLKIT

A guide to establishing healthy
digital habits as you introduce
a new device.

Developed by



SCREEN SANITY

Partnering to guide the next generation
towards a healthier digital future.

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WELCOME

HEY THERE!

You're likely reading this because you are about to embark on a major milestone in your child's life – getting their first phone! While this time can be filled with excitement, it can also be worrisome for parents. The digital world provides incredible opportunities for connection and exploration, but it can also be a big, scary place. Keeping kids safe online can feel like an overwhelming task.

Not to worry! UScellular and Screen Sanity joined forces to fill the pages of this Smarter Start Toolkit with conversation prompts and quick tips to help set intentions, draw boundaries, and establish trust between you and your child as they begin their phone journey.

We like to think that teaching a kid to use a phone is similar to teaching a kid to drive a car. When they turn 16, you don't just hand them the keys and wish them luck. You start in empty parking lots and on less busy roads before moving to higher traffic areas – offering guided practice to navigating risky situations and road hazards.

When introducing a phone to your child, take this same “driver's ed” approach. Start simple, with limited options and freedom that grows slowly as your child demonstrates competence, and eventually, they will learn to be a self-regulated, independent driver.

You'll notice the content is divided into two sections: one for parents to review on their own and one for you to do alongside your child. We hope the tools inside this kit give you peace-of-mind and equip you to mentor your child on the digital road ahead.



UScellular is on a mission to lead conversation around developing healthier relationships with technology to bring healthier digital habits to all. The tools and resources we provide will help introduce technology in a smart and thoughtful way.

SCREEN SANITY

Screen Sanity is an international nonprofit that equips parents to be mentors and guides so kids grow up happy and healthy in an increasingly digital world. It is their mission to create a world where kids are captivated by life, not screens. Learn more at screensanity.org

TALKING POINTS + SETTING HEALTHY TECH HABITS

Ready to start your child’s phone journey off with the gift of clear expectations?

We gotcha covered! Here are some talking points to consider, along with example language you can use when having conversations with your child. The language and tips here correlate with the sections in the following Phone Plan, which can be filled out alongside your child.

Please note: This is simply example language – you may not include all of the things mentioned here. What's most important is that you and your family get aligned through open dialogue so you can honor and respect each other on the road ahead.



THE BIG PICTURE



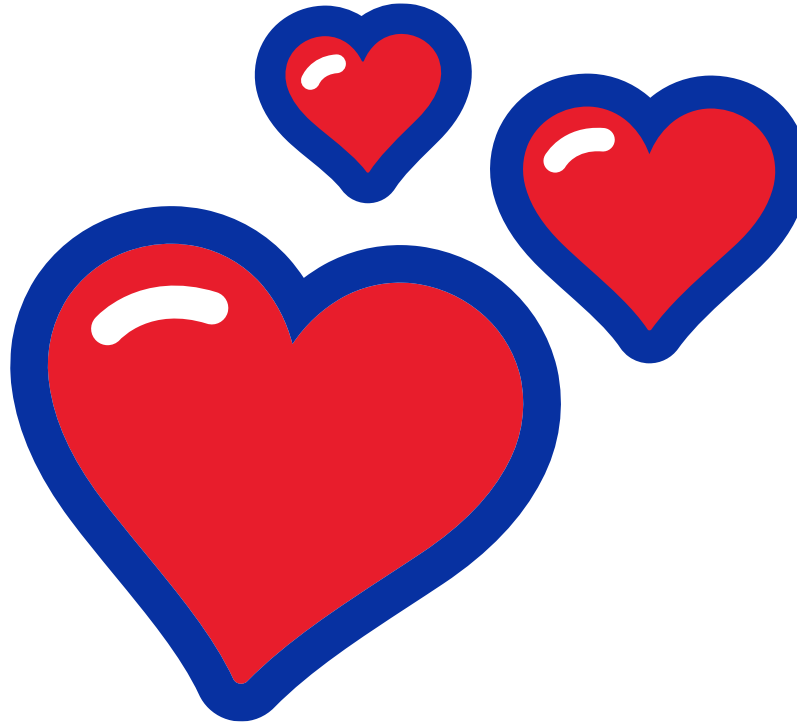
DEVICE-FREE ZONES



ACCOUNTABILITY



LEARNER’S PERMIT



TIME WELL SPENT



THE BIG PICTURE

YOU MIGHT SAY

“This phone is powerful – it can draw us closer together, or further apart. It’s our goal to make sure that we use this new device to support, not detract, from the things that matter most to us.”

TIP 1

What are the family values (e.g., kindness, honesty) that will guide your child’s digital habits?



YOU MIGHT SAY

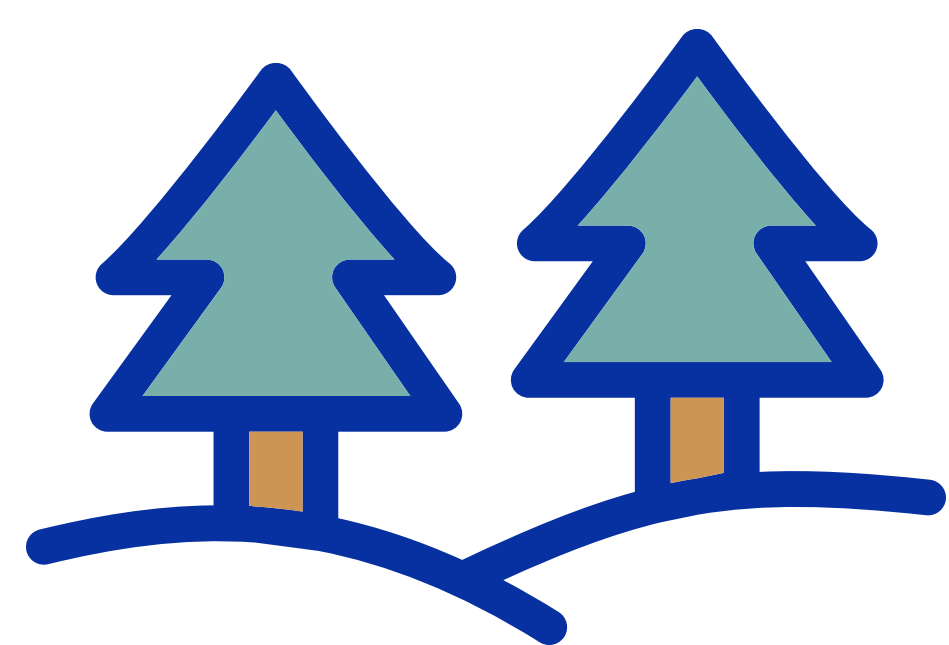
“A phone is a tool, not a toy – and it has the potential to harm you if not used in healthy ways. As the owner of the phone, I’m here to guide you and keep you safe as you learn to use this device.”

YOU MIGHT SAY

“Our phones connect and unite us in many amazing ways, I’m excited for you to step into this new experience! Sometimes though, we can get lost in the digital world and lose sight of our true selves. As your parent, I’ll always help you navigate who you are and who you strive to be, both on and offline.”

TIP 2

Giving a phone as a gift can blur the lines of ownership – you might instead present the device as an item on loan (from you, the owner).



DEVICE-FREE ZONES

YOU MIGHT SAY

“Our phones need to recharge, and we do too! To protect time for ourselves and each other, we’re going to pick some device-free zones where we disconnect to reconnect.”

TIP



Don’t feel like you need to list them all – just choose 2-3 that feel right for your family.

TIP



One of the healthiest things you can do for your child and their sleep is set a norm that devices aren’t in their bedroom at night.

YOU MIGHT SAY

“This is especially true at night. Let’s decide right now where you can charge your phone when it’s time for you to unplug and go to bed. And, let’s talk about what time that should be.”

YOU MIGHT SAY

“Creating these habits is easier said than done, so let’s think about some practices that will help us stick to our device-free zones.

For example, I won’t text you during class, and I give you permission to put the phone away anytime you need to be present, focused or just take a mental break. “(I won’t expect an immediate response when I text you.)”



ACCOUNTABILITY

YOU MIGHT SAY

"I love you. The internet isn't always looking out for your wellbeing, but I am. And there is nothing that you could do or see online that would make me love you less. Accidents are bound to happen; you will make mistakes. And when you do, I will be here to walk you through them. I will not freak out or judge you. I will not throw your phone in a lake somewhere. I am a safe person. You can talk to me."

YOU MIGHT SAY

"Because I love you, I'm not sending you into the digital world unprotected. Let's talk about safety nets. First, we are going to take a moment and download a filter (like Bark or Canopy) on your phone, and make sure your accounts are all set to "private."

TIP



Even with safety nets in place, mistakes happen. When your child shares — or you uncover — an awkward or shocking situation, it's critical you don't overreact. The following phrases can help you keep your "poker face" and establish that you are a safe harbor for your child.

- "Tell me more."
- "Thanks so much for trusting me with this."
- "Gosh, that's hard. How did that make you feel?"

TIP



There are both internet- and device-level filters that can help keep hardcore content out of your child's online world.

YOU MIGHT SAY

"But, I want you to know that these won't protect you from everything. Your best way to stay safe is to keep talking to me. Another thing that will keep you safe is to avoid using your phone in private (like bedrooms and bathrooms) — where it is more tempting to make choices you might regret. We'll make it our norm that we don't use our devices in these spots. Another safety net is for you to keep me updated on your passwords. I won't hover over you and I'm not going to check in every day, but I need to have it in case of an emergency."



LEARNER'S PERMIT

YOU MIGHT SAY

“Someday you will have full use of this phone. But today, we will strip it down to a few features, the ones you really need. The next few years will be a little bit like going through driver’s ed, and this is your learner’s permit.”

TIP

1

When beginning with a new device, first consider what level of functionality your child needs. Then, set the device to match those needs, preparing your child with small, supported steps before they dive in fully.

YOU MIGHT SAY

“You can expect me to ride right by your side, helping you with every new challenge you run into. As you get older, I will allow you to earn more freedom as you prove you can ‘drive’ your phone well.”

TIP

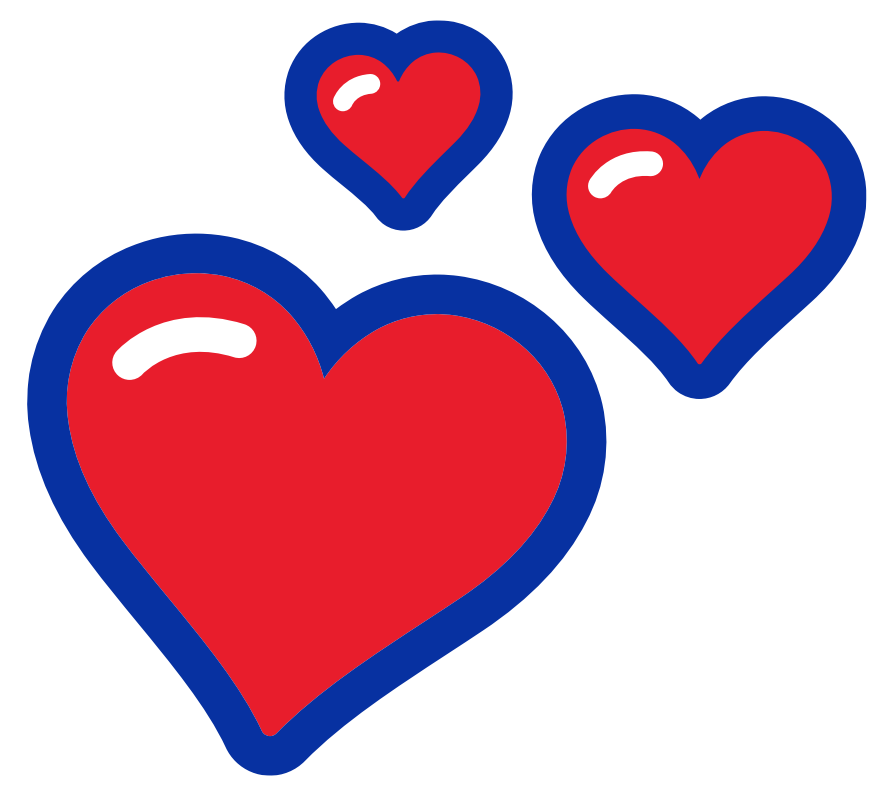
2

Reveal the roadmap ahead of your child by setting a goal for full independence – perhaps their junior or senior year of high school. We recommend they have their full license sometime before they flee the nest.

SET A GOAL!

My goal is for you to have full use of your phone by _____ year.





TIME WELL SPENT

YOU MIGHT SAY

“Life is big, screens are small...and you deserve to live your fullest life. We’ll set aside a reasonable amount of time for gaming, entertainment and/or social media apps and we’ll also make a plan to protect and carve out time for the offline activities you love.”

TIP



It can help to envision screentime falling into three buckets: times when you create, times when you connect and times when you just consume. A general rule to remember is to choose screentime that helps you create and connect, rather than consume.

YOU MIGHT SAY

“Oh, and I’ll be planning to check in on how things are going with your phone. Don’t be surprised when I occasionally ask if time on your phone is “time well spent.” I promise you, I’ll be asking myself the same question.”

YOU MIGHT SAY

“Our phones can help us connect and create in many amazing ways. Sometimes though, we accidentally ‘phub’ each other (snubbing each other for our phones). What’s a way we can signal to each other that we need some face-to-face time?”

TIP

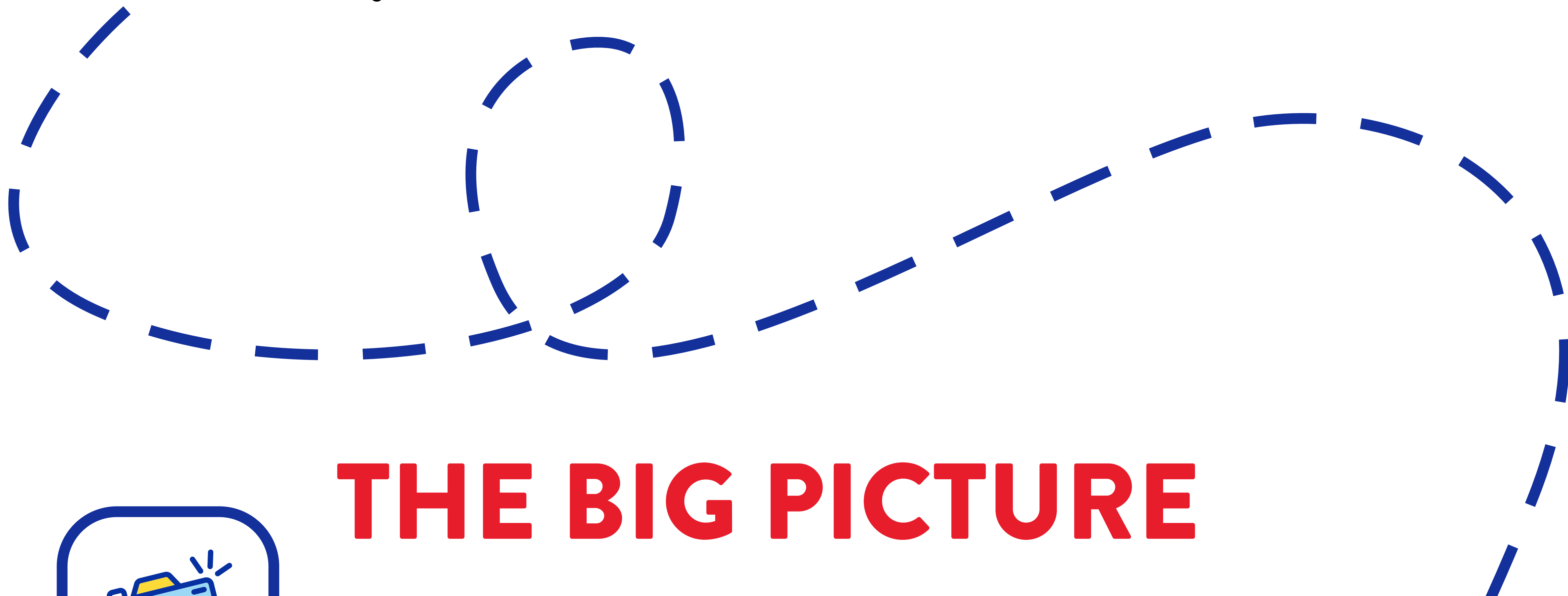


If you’re feeling brave, you might even invite your kiddo to alert you when your own phone use isn’t following these same guidelines. This can feel scary – we get it, we’re learning from our own kids right alongside you!



PHONE PLAN & PLEDGE

Getting a phone is a big milestone – welcome and congratulations! The following plan is a guide to help you set intentions and start your journey with healthy habits.



THE BIG PICTURE



These values will guide our phone use:

- ☐ Connection
- ☐ Integrity
- ☐ Kindness
- ☐ Respect
- ☐ Trust
- ☐ _____
- ☐ _____

With our digital presence, we will strive to:

- ☐ Be authentic to our true selves
- ☐ Speak up for causes that matter
- ☐ Lift others up, rather than tear them down
- ☐ Reflect regularly on our digital habits
- ☐ Honestly share with one another about our online worlds and habits
- ☐ Other: _____

These types of activities support those values:

- ☐ Communicate kindly and respectfully with others
- ☐ Message/post things we would feel comfortable saying to someone in person
- ☐ Be discerning about who we allow to follow us and who we follow
- ☐ Fact-check information before we reshare it
- ☐ Set our devices aside at times to connect with others in real life
- ☐ Keep appropriate settings (backgrounds, ringtones, etc.)
- ☐ Other: _____



DEVICE-FREE ZONES

Practices that will help us commit to device-free zones:

- ☐ Putting devices in a charging zone or spot
- ☐ Keeping my device in my desk/ backpack
- ☐ Setting device to limit notifications at certain times
- ☐ _____

These are the times and spaces we will commit to unplugging:

- ☐ Meals
- ☐ Bedtimes
- ☐ Family outings
- ☐ School
- ☐ Mornings
- ☐ Car rides (driver’s & passenger’s seat)
- ☐ Sports practices/games
- ☐ When friends are over
- ☐ Other: _____

This is the time and place I will plug my phone in at night outside of my bedroom:



ACCOUNTABILITY

When I create a new account or update a password, I will let my parents know by:

- ☐ Text
- ☐ Email
- ☐ Post-it
- ☐ Updating family password list
- ☐ Other: _____

I will keep these safety nets in place:

- ☐ Setting accounts to private
- ☐ Turning off location
- ☐ Blocking messages and calls from strangers
- ☐ Not using phone in private spots, like bathrooms
- ☐ We will use _____ filtering service to keep you safe

ACCOUNTABILITY CONTINUED

If someone shows me inappropriate content, here is my action plan:

- ☐ Look away
- ☐ Let parents know (We promise not to overreact)
- ☐ Excuse yourself to go to the restroom
- ☐ Other: _____

If someone asks me for an inappropriate picture, here is what I can say:

If I'm at a party or event and feel uncomfortable, here is our secret code I can text my parents to be picked up:



LEARNER'S PERMIT

These features/apps will be activated as a starting point for my device:

- | | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| ☐ Text Messaging | ☐ Calling |
| ☐ Family | ☐ Location tracking |
| ☐ Friends | ☐ Camera / photo gallery |
| ☐ Photo texting | ☐ Calculator |
| ☐ Group texting | ☐ Music Player |

I will show I am ready to add new privileges by:

- ☐ Respecting designated device-free zones
- ☐ Plugging my phone in on time at night without reminders
- ☐ Asking my parents before changing settings, passwords, etc. on my device
- ☐ Coming to my parents with any challenges or speed bumps with my device
- ☐ Other: _____



To minimize distractions and focus on human connection, don't forget you can always set your phone to **US Mode**.

[Click here to learn how.](#)



Our goal is complete phone independence by my

year in high school.



TIME WELL SPENT

Activities I consider “time well spent”:

Offline: _____

Online: _____

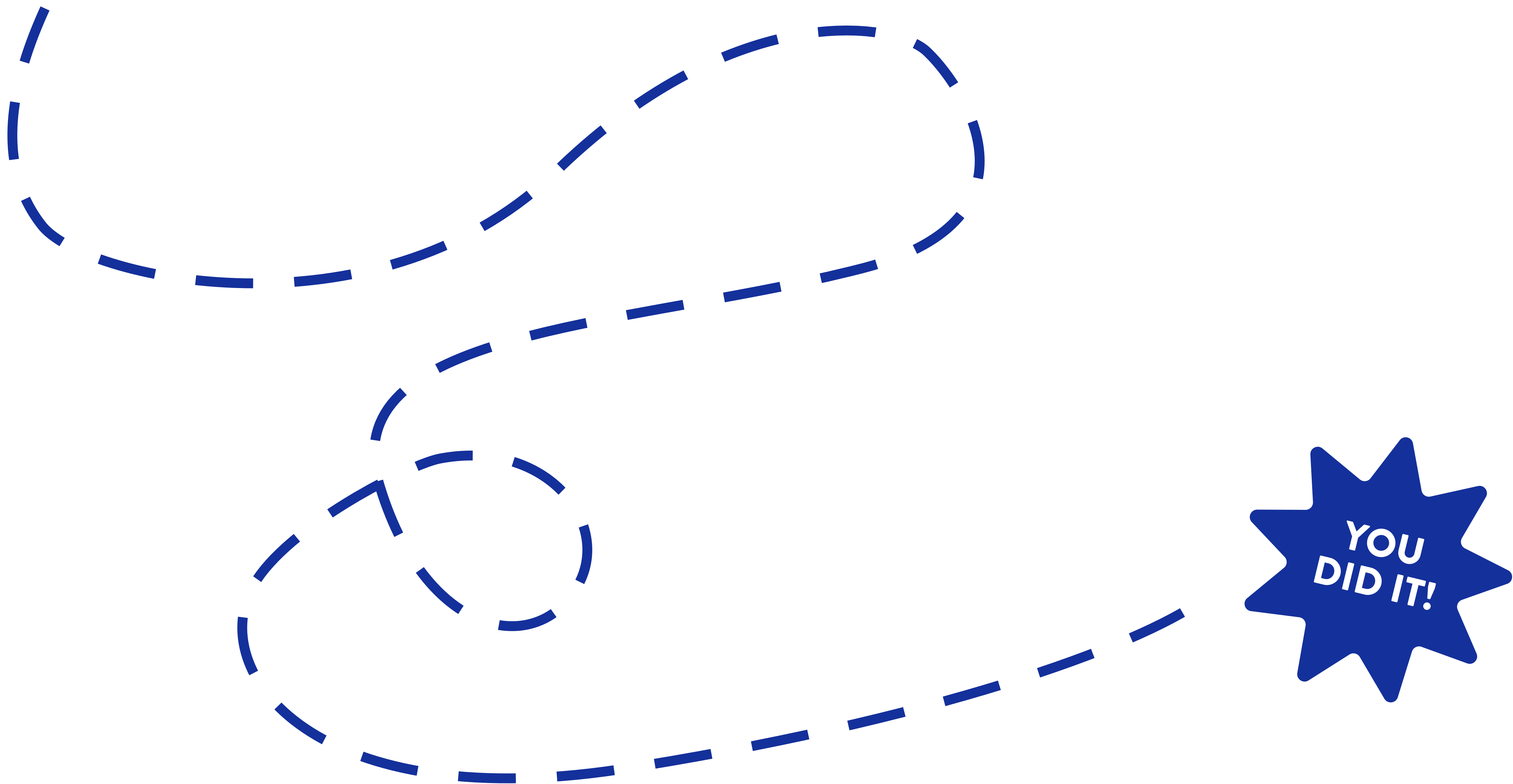
To protect time for offline activities we love, we will strive to limit our gaming, entertainment and/or social media apps consumption to _____ minutes/hours per day.

A signal/code word we can use to let each other know we need to put the phone down and have face-to-face time: _____

As a family, we plan to check in every _____ about our phone habits.

These types of "friction" can help us make sure the phone isn't distracting us from what matters most:

- ☐ Limiting notifications
- ☐ Removing addictive apps from the home screen
- ☐ Putting my device aside when working/focusing
- ☐ Other: _____



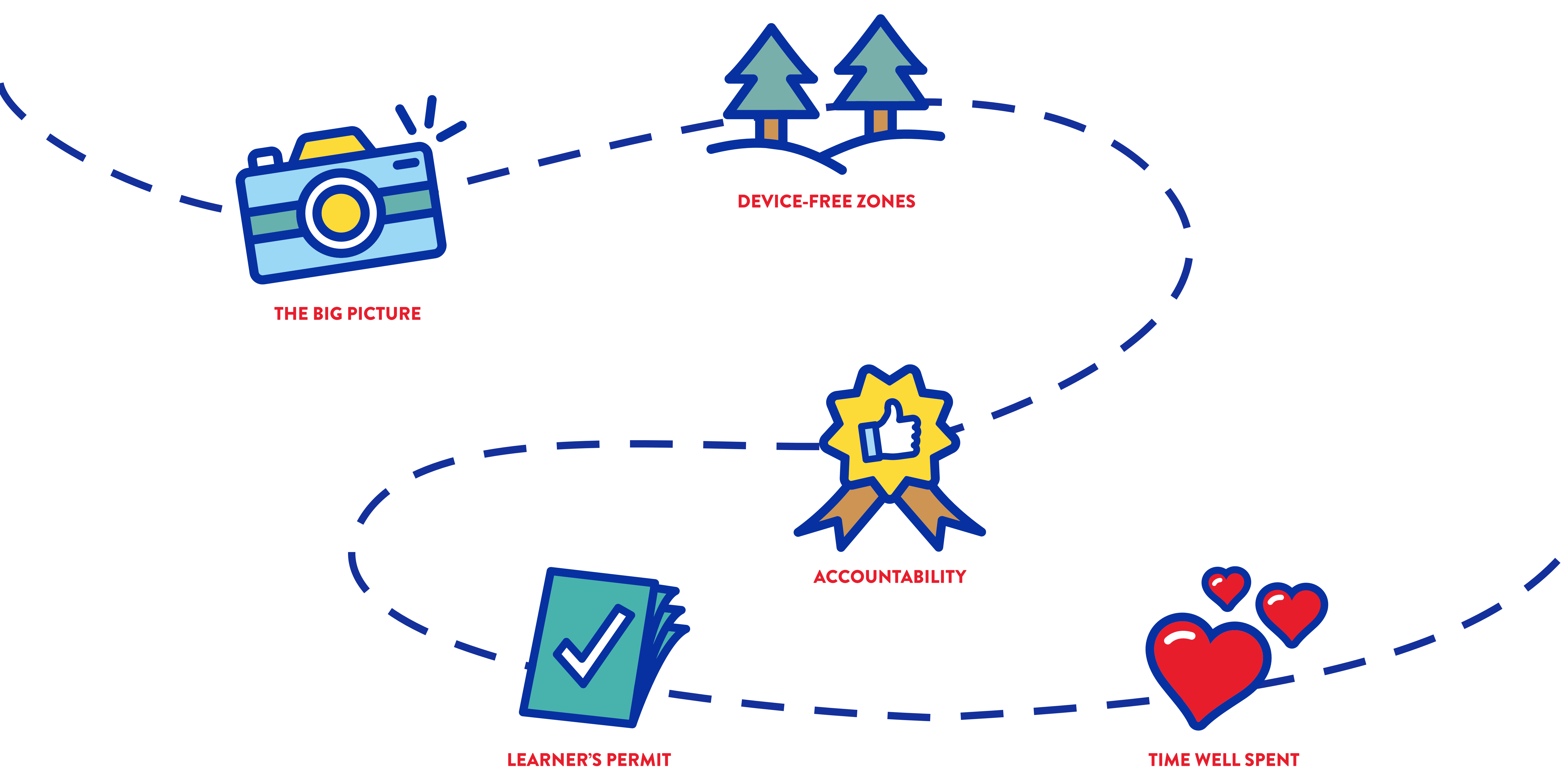
PARENT & CHILD AGREEMENT / PLEDGE

Our phones are amazing tools that help connect and unite us, and using them, we agree to strive for having healthy digital habits. This might be hard at times, and that’s okay! We’re not required to always get it right, and we probably won’t.

As we use our phones, we will celebrate when things go well and guide and support one another when we hit bumps in the road. Above all, we will strive to have honest and open conversations with one another about our devices, encouraging each other toward our values and our connection, and bringing back to what’s most important...**US**.

Child signature

Parent signature



TECH TOPICS ACTIVITY

Cut out these Tech Topics and store them in a bowl or mason jar. Use them to strike up a conversation with your tween or teen about phone and digital expectations. Stay curious and try to see the world through each other's eyes. Your goal? Deepened trust and empathy – a firm foundation for the road ahead.

What social media account that you follow seems the **most inauthentic**? What kinds of things does that person post?

You post a picture to social media and see later it's getting **fewer likes** than your other posts. What do you do? How do you feel?

How does social media make you feel about your **self-image**? Is comparison a thief of joy?

What **hashtags** are you following? Which ones are you avoiding? Why?

Your best friend suggests you **swap phone passwords** because you share everything and if you don't, you must not trust them. What should you do? Are there any other bad experiences you've heard about from sharing passwords with others?

What's the difference between **privacy** and **secrecy**?

For you, what would you say is “**time well spent**” on our phone/social media?

Have you ever felt or seen **bullying** on phones/social media?

What **influencers** are you following? What interesting things have you learned from them recently? Do you trust them?

What are your **personal values**? How can you avoid posting things that go against your values?

A friend of yours receives a **nude picture** from someone at school and shows it to you. How do you respond to your friend? Who can you ask for help?

Your neighbor texts you asking you to drive slower down the street. How do you respond? Are **emojis** appropriate?

What if you get a flat tire and will be late for work? Is it **okay to text** bosses and colleagues?

A teacher assigns a deadline for midnight on Friday evening. You work your hardest to finish the assignment, but at 10 p.m., you are exhausted and need a break. Will you continue to work into the night to finish the assignment? What are **your boundaries** around logging off screens and what will you say to communicate them?

You see pictures of friends hanging out together over the weekend and you weren't invited. What do you do? How can you move from a place of insecurity to a place of **freedom and confidence**? What can you do to practice self-care?

You post a picture with a friend and later learn that you accidentally made someone feel excluded. How do you respond? What can you do to **repair the damage**?

What is **one goal** or resolution you have for the year ahead? How can tech help you achieve that goal? How might it stand in the way?

How can you **protect your attention**? Is it important to always be available? When do you keep your phone on silent and when is it okay to leave your ringer on? What about notifications?

We all want to **feel known, seen and followed**. What's your personal policy for deciding who to allow to follow you on social media? What's your policy for who to follow and when to unfollow someone?

You like a photo you've taken that has other people in it, but you are not sure it is flattering to a friend who is in it. Should you **post it anyway**?

You are reading a personal email and a parent, sibling or friend looks over your shoulder. How can you **kindly communicate** that you need space?

Your sibling left their phone on the counter and left the room. A text comes through on one of them from a friend asking a question you know the answer to. **Should you respond** on behalf of your sibling?

ADD YOUR OWN!

Add your own questions or thought starters for even deeper conversation with your child.