Alternatives to Standard Smartphones

Our recommendation: To support parents and caregivers, we have compiled a list of alternatives to standard smartphones. These options can help families manage screen time, filter content, monitor online activity, and receive alerts about potential safety concerns. While these alternatives can be helpful, they work best when paired with transparency—parents are encouraged to inform children they will be checking their devices regularly. *Please note, for complete breakdowns of alternative devices, we encourage you to explore the device's website or contact support services. **Ongoing communication between parents and children is essential to establish clear expectations, promote digital responsibility, and support healthy, age-appropriate technology use.**

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This resource sheet compares five smartphone alternatives for kids, including key details, pricing, pros and cons, and who each option is best for—making it easier for parents and caregivers to decide what works best for their family.

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Phone Facts for Children:

Important to know: Most adults today have smartphones, and children are getting them at increasingly younger ages as well. The overall recommendation is to delay or seek alternatives for as long as possible.

- The median age for first phone ownership is 11 years old.
- Early smartphone ownership is associated with higher rates of depression, obesity, and insufficient sleep.
- While standard smartphones have some parental controls, they DO NOT come with definitive child safety guardrails.

Persuasive Design: Most tech companies design their products to maximize user engagement.

- Push notifications.
- Infinite scrolling.
- Automatically playing videos.
- Measuring popularity.

Take Aura's Phone Readiness Quiz!

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Recommendations:

Research consistently shows parental involvement is one of the strongest predictors of healthy technology use. Here are some of our recommendations.

- Screen-free bedrooms.
- Device-free family meals.
- Regular device check-ins.
- Social media age expectations.
- Ongoing online safety discussions.
- Consequences for misuse.

Before Devices:

Questions to Ask: Before introducing children to a device, consider asking the following questions.

- Why does my child need a device?
- Who do they need to communicate with?
- Do they need texting capabilities?
- Do they need internet access?
- Do they need GPS?
- Can a smartwatch or calling-only device meet the need?
- What digital skills and responsibilities have they already demonstrated?

Alternative Devices:

Bark

General Info: The Bark Phone is a Samsung A16 and the Pro is a Samsung A36. It was chosen because it looks like a standard smartphone, but with more robust parental controls. When purchasing a Bark phone for the first time, parents/caregivers decide if they want to allow their children access to apps and browsers with parental approval. Parents/caregivers can also request a phone that is limited to calling and texting only.

Pricing: (2026)

- Bark Phone: $10/month.
- Bark Phone Pro: $25/month.
- Cellular Starter Plan:
  - $29/month Unlimited talk & text Wi-Fi only.
- Cellular Advanced Plan:
  - Unlimited talk and text.
  - Plans range starting at $39/month (Wi-Fi only), $49/month (4GB data/month), $59/month (8GB data/month), and $79/month (35GB premium data/month).

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Bark, cont.

Pros:

- Option to keep current phone number if applicable.
- All plans include Bark Premium subscription.
- GPS location tracking.
- Contact management.
- Monitoring texts and photos.
- Users cannot access web browsers or download apps.
- Advanced plan includes: access to Google Play Store, web browsers and voicemail.
    - Approve apps and contacts.
    - Ability to set screen time limits and block inappropriate content.
    - Remove functions at any time including social media and web browsers.

Cons:

- Some manual setup is required upon receiving the Bark phone.
- Pre-installed apps may need to be removed in the beginning.
- Default settings need to be adjusted manually.
- More expensive than other alternatives.
- Allows internet (some parents prefer full lockout).
- Alerts can occasionally lag or miss context.
- Not ideal for very young children (under 9).

Best for: Parents who want their kids to learn real phone use safely and care about mental health monitoring.

Gabb Wireless

General Info: Gabb Phone 4 is a kid-safe smartphone designed primarily for tweens ages 9-14. It looks and feels like a modern smartphone but deliberately removes internet access, social media, and open app stores to reduce online risk while still keeping kids connected to family. Gabb also offers *Gabb Music* with millions of clean, filtered music only with no explicit lyrics or album art.

Pricing: (2026) ~$149.99 (Pay in full) or $6.87/month for 24 months.

- Starter Package ~ $24.99/month.
- Standard Package ~ $29.99/month.
- Advanced Package ~ $34.99/month.

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Gabb Wireless, cont.

Pros:

- Strong screen time schedules and driving reports.
- Works across Android, iOS, Windows, Mac, and Chromebook.
- Easy to use with regular updates.
- No internet browser.
- No social media apps.
- Filtered messaging & alerts.
- GPS tracking with Safe Zones.
- Spam call & text blocking.
- Hard for kids to bypass controls.
- Looks like a standard smartphone.
- Unlimited talk & text with all plans.
- Kids cannot delete messages.
- AI monitoring capabilities.

Cons:

- One-time $30 activation fee.
- Phones only work on Gabb's cellular network and function only in the contiguous U.S.
- Not ideal for teens who need full web access.
- No internet or app store capabilities (for older youth).

Best For: Kids getting their first smartphone, parents who want real safety, not just screen-time limits, and families transitioning from flip phone or smartwatch.

Pinwheel

General Info: Pinwheel is a kid-safe smartphone system that runs on modified Android phones. Ideal for ages 8-16, Pinwheel smartphones enable responsible and healthy usage for youth, while providing modes managed by parents. Pinwheel's goal is to deliver technology that supports a child's everyday growth while teaching them to use smartphones as productive tools—rather than focusing solely on restricting phone usage.

Pricing: Calls + text + data included.

- Genesis 4 ~ $119.
  - $29.99/month (Quarterly and yearly billing options available).
- Slim 7 ~ $219.
  - $29.99/month (Quarterly and yearly billing options available).
- Plus 6 ~ $299.
  - $29.99/month.

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Pinwheel, cont.

Pros:

- App Library offers more than 1,200 apps.
  - Google, Spotify, DuoLingo, Zoom, Gmail, Google Classroom, Sheets, etc.
- Evaluates apps based on set guidelines developed in conjuction with child development experts.
- Works with multiple carriers including AT&T and T-Mobile.
- Looks like a real smartphone.
- Parents can see text and call history.
- Set daily schedules for school, bedtime, and free time.
- GPS tracking.
  - Alerts for arriving/leaving places such as school or home.
- No social media.
- Landlines available.
  - Parent-approved contacts, set calling hours, simple Wi-Fi setup, emergency calls available for free.

Cons:

- No advanced monitoring.
- Limited apps vs real smartphones.
- Some models don't work with all carriers.
- Kids may outgrow it faster than other alternative smartphones.
- No AI scanning for bullying or self-harm.

Best For: Parents with children between the ages of 8-14 who want to restrict internet and social media capabilities, while allowing certain apps approved by child development experts.

Troomi

General Info: Troomi is a kid-safe smartphone designed to give kids real phone features while keeping them protected. Designed for youth ages 7-14, parents have described this device as a controlled smartphone that can grow over time. Start with calls and texts only, and add apps, filtered browsing, and other features at a later time.

Pricing:

- Samsung Galaxy A16 5G ~ $199.95 or $8.50/month.
- Samsung XCover 7 Pro ~ $599.95 or $24.60/month.
  - Do (Basic Plan) ~ $24.95/month.
  - Dream (Text Images & Groups Plan) ~ $29.95/month.
  - Discover (Unlimited talk, text & apps Plan) ~ $34.95/month.

Pros:

- Good middle-ground between safety and functionality.
- Allows users to add features gradually.
- App support.
- Strong parental controls.
- More affordable than other alternatives such as Bark.

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Troomi, cont.

Cons:

- Limited apps compared to real smartphones.
- No default internet (not ideal for teens who want full app freedom).
- Requires Troomi network.
- Monitoring isn't as advanced as some alternatives.

Best For: Parents with children ages 7-13 who need a first smartphone with features that can gradually expand as they mature.

Option For Younger Kids:

If you have younger children (ages 5-7) and want to give them a way to stay connected—whether it's with friends, relatives, or grandparents from out of state—but you're not quite ready to hand them their own mobile device, here's a great alternative.

Tin Can

General Info: The Tin Can phone is a screen-free, kid-friendly landline-style phone. Step back into the retro landline days with this unique phone which uses Wi-Fi instead of cell service. A great way to delay giving young children a smartphone while still letting them communicate with friends and family, no screen addiction risk.

Pricing: $75 - $100 per phone.

- Free calls to other Tin Can devices.
- $9.99/month to call friends and family.

Pros:

- Connects to home Wi-Fi.
- Call approved numbers (if enabled).
- Set calling hours.
- "Do Not Disturb" on/off.
- Free plan allows calls to only other Tin Can devices.
  - Optional plan allows calls to regular phones.
- Zero exposure to internet/social media.
- Simple for young kids.

Cons:

- Very limited (only calls).
- Requires Wi-Fi at home.
- Device is not mobile.
- May not be useful for older kids/teens.
- Needs friends to also have Tin Can device or paid plan (if both have a Tin Can device, they can chat for free).

Best For: Parents who want to provide their child a phone to communicate with their friends/family.

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Comparing the Alternatives:

Phone	General Pricing	Core Strengths	Best For
Bark	~Bark phone~$10/month ~Bark phone pro~$25/month	Alerts on risky content, social media/text monitoring, GPS location tracking, zero access to web browsers or apps.	Families concerned about online safety risks and risky behavior.
Gabb Wireless	~$149.99 (Pay in full) or $6.87/month for 24 months	Android, iOS, Windows, Mac, and Chromebook capable, no social media or internet browser, spam call/text blocking.	Kids getting first smartphone and families transitioning from flip phone or smartwatches.
Pinwheel	~Genesis 4 $119 ~Slim 7 $219 ~Plus 6 $299	Over 1,200 apps available based on set guidelines (zero social media), parents can see text/call history, daily schedules, GPS tracking, landlines available.	Children between ages of 8-14 with no social media or internet capabilities, but other safe apps are available.
Tin Can	~$75-$100 per phone ~$9.99/month to call non Tin Can devices	Simple, budget friendly, approve all incoming/outgoing calls, set calling hours, no risk to smartphone addiction.	Parents who want to provide children a phone to communicate with their friends/family.
Troomi	~Samsung Galaxy A16 5G $199.95 ~Samsung XCover 7 Pro $599.95	Add features gradually, strong parental controls, more affordable option.	Children ages 7-13 looking for first smartphone, allowing growth with device.

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