Apps that regulate kids' use of phones

Dorcas Yang

Liu Yue Heng finally got his first smartphone after his Primary School Leaving Examination at the age of 12.

Many of his friends had received their first phones from Primary 3, which made him feel a little left out.

Interviews with at least nine families showed that children were getting their first phone around 10 or 11, although some got them when they were as young as eight, said parents and experts.

Age was not a barrier as long as their children "showed they were ready" or if there was a need, especially if they started going to school on their own and had to stay contactable, said parents.

At the same time, parents are also turning to apps to regulate their kids' use of the phones.

Some commonly used apps include Norton Family, Google Family Link and Qustodio.

For those using iPhones, parents use the built-in Apple controls, such as the Screen Time feature, and content and privacy restrictions, as well as the "Find My Location" tracking function that allows users to track their devices.

These apps let parents set screen-time limits and content restrictions on their children's phones, and even track their phone activities. The kids cannot change those settings unless they know their parents' passwords.

Yue Heng's father Liu Kerh Li said that shortly after his son, now 14, got his phone, the teen's screen time shot up with a flurry of activities on social media and chat apps.

The 43-year-old manager started to set screen-time limits on Yue Heng's phone when he felt his son's phone usage had become excessive.

Madam Reine Lee Hui Siam, 44, a social worker, relies on Google Family Link, a parental control app, to set time limits and lock her children's phones when they are not supposed to be using them. Both her children, aged 13 and 16, have their own phones now.

She said: "I was reluctant to give them a phone and I tried to delay giving one for as long as possible.

"However, once they entered secondary school, it became necessary for them to have one. A lot of information is passed through online chats by teachers and classmates. It's no longer like in primary school when parents are informed by the school for everything.

"But a phone comes with a lot of distractions on the Internet or from games. There's a lot of exposure that could be harmful."

Professor Hee Jhee Jiow, a member of the Media Literacy Council, encourages parents to use parental control apps for their children to teach self-restraint.

"Young children may not have the maturity to control their own phone usage," he said.

Parents should avoid being poor role models, comparing their children with their peers, and not making an effort to understand their

Mr Liu Kerh Li uses screen-time limits to help manage the mobile phone usage of his son, Yue Heng (both above). ST PHOTO: ALPHONSUS CHERN

needs, when it comes to managing their phone usage, he added.

Mr Chong Ee Jay, deputy head at FamChamps, a community youth movement, said: "It is necessary to use parental control apps. When they are still young, you want to make sure to regulate their phone usage because they may not understand how to themselves."

But be careful not to "outsource" parenting to these apps, Mr Chong warned.

"Engaging the child in conversations is still needed. There needs to be a balance between a talking-down approach and having open conversation."

He recommends that parents have discussions with their children at least once a week about technology, on topics such as the challenges they face or fun things about tech.

He advises parents with older children to adjust the boundaries accordingly. "They already hear a lot from the school on the dos and don'ts. A relational approach is what they need at home."

The reality is that children's screen time will increase as they stay home more often during the pandemic, he said, urging parents to think of how to help them make better use of their time on the devices.

"Engage with them and find out what they do. Children these days figure out a lot of things by themselves on the phone, like video-editing, digital scrapbooking and learning how to code. Be interested," he added.