10 top tips for safely using SMARTWATCHES

Kids love gadgets, and smartwatches – available to buy from as little as £20 online – make a tempting gift. As with any type of mobile technology, though, smartwatches can pose risks to children unless they’re used safely. Receiving unwanted calls, cyberbullying and distracting a young person when they’re crossing the road are all known risks associated with smartwatches. However, these devices can bring plenty of benefits for children and parents alike – so let’s examine the pros and cons of smartwatches.

**AVOID CHEAP OPTIONS**

A quick search online yields a torrent of cheap smartwatches for kids, costing as little as £20. It’s wise to avoid this bargain basement tech; it tends to deliver a poor experience with inferior battery life, and it’s hard to justify spending them to the software’s safety. There have been cases of smartwatches being hacked to track or contact children; stick to known brands who have a reputation to protect.

**CONTROL CALLING**

Many smartwatches have the facility to make or take calls. As with a phone, you may want to restrict who your child can call – or be called by. On Apple Watches, you can select trusted contacts who are allowed to ring your child, while other watches’ controls vary hugely. Some need to connect to a linked phone for calls, so you may be able to block unknown contacts via that device instead.

**BEWARE HIDDEN COSTS**

For a smartwatch to allow calls independently (by being connected to a phone via Bluetooth), it needs its own mobile operator contract. This might take the form of a tiny SIM card or a specific slot into the device, an eSIM, where the physical card is replaced by software settings. Either way, this will incur an additional monthly cost that you’ll need to factor into any buying decision.

**ENABLE FAMILY SHARING**

Apple Watches aren’t cheap, but they do offer superb safety features – allowing parents to control calls, great messages and emails on the device, as well as a location tracking system that can send alerts if kids wander beyond pre-set boundaries. Their SOS function enables children to contact emergency services instantly if they’re in trouble, which simultaneously also alerts parents and caregivers.

**MAKE THEM COOL FOR SCHOOL**

Some schools have banned smartwatches, as pupils have been using them as substitutes to text messages, but for a while the school does permit them, some devices can be set to prevent distractions in class. For example, Apple’s School mode turns the display off during class hours. The display changes in this mode, showing teachers that it isn’t being used for other purposes.

**BE MINDFUL OF BEDTIME**

Many smartwatches offer sleep tracking, which some (usually older) children use to justify using them to bed. However, this represents a temptation to message friends or check social media late at night, even if the device doesn’t necessarily have a long life. This encourages them to do some exercise. Many watches record the wearer’s daily step count and measure other health metrics.

**TRACK ITS LOCATION**

Both Apple and Android devices have apps which allow you to track a smartwatch’s location. They can also initiate an audio alert – avoiding those embarrassing moments when a treasured device can’t be found at home. If you’re planning to track your child’s location via their watch, make them aware of that in advance. You could also set it as a condition of them getting the watch in the first place.

**THINK ‘SAFETY FIRST’**

Smartwatches are often worth hundreds of pounds, meaning they can make young people wearing one a target for thieves. Advise your child to keep the watch hidden in public (when possible) and not to wear it if muggers demand their watch. If you manage to track a stolen device, pass that information to the police; location data isn’t always accurate, so you could end up wrongly accusing someone.

**STORE MEDICAL INFO**

Devices including the Samsung Galaxy Watch and Apple Watch can store the medical details (such as their blood group and any pre-existing conditions) potentially giving emergency services quick access in a crisis. These devices also have ‘hard fall’ detection, which sends a text message to selected contacts along with a map showing the wearer’s location.

**USE THEM AS MOTIVATION**

If you’ve worried your child’s spending too much time slumped on the sofa staring at their screens, smartwatches are great fitness trackers and can be a great incentive to get moving. Some devices will alert the wearer if they’ve not exercised for a long time, and encourage them to do some exercise. Many watches record the wearer’s daily step count and measure other health metrics.

Meet Our Expert

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