

UW-Madison School of Medicine and Public Health: UW research on adolescent smartphone use provides novel findings

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Madison, WI – Young adolescents think a child’s maturity, not necessarily age, should be a factor in when a child gets a smartphone – and they worry about using that phone to bully other children.

As debate rages on about when a child should get a smartphone, a study by the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health provides novel and sometimes surprising findings that address that and other related questions.

The results of the research by Dr. Megan Moreno, professor of pediatrics and director of the Social Media and Adolescent Health Research Team (SMAHRT), were published today in the *Journal of Adolescent Health*.

“Our team’s findings present novel viewpoints to inform current discussions around the appropriate timing and parental strategies for tweens’ first smartphones,” said Moreno.

The study involved 12 focus groups of tweens otherwise known as early adolescents. A total of 45 participants ages 10 to 14 represented both rural and

urban areas.

Maturity: The early adolescents were quick to dismiss the notion of an ideal age to get a smartphone. They said maturity and reaching milestones, such as the transition to middle school, are better gauges for when early adolescents should have smartphones. The focus groups said parents should provide early adolescents with their own smartphones when they need one instead of when they just want one.

Deference to parents: Previous studies describe a disconnect between young adolescents and their parents, while this study shows tweens want parental involvement.

The tweens said parents should have the final word on when their children get smartphones, but they said the young people should be part of the conversation with their parents. They also pointed out that parents should have the right to check their child's smartphone. They said parental rules are important and should be specific for when and how long a smartphone can be used.

Accountability: Focus groups said tweens need to be accountable for their actions when using a smartphone and to avoid pitfalls. One theme across multiple focus groups was knowing how to avoid being the perpetrator or target of cyberbullying. The tweens perceived their own capacity to bully as a risk of smartphone use, a novel finding of this research. The tweens said the right time to get a smartphone is when they know right from wrong and know not to cyberbully.

Who should pay for the costs of a smartphone? Opinions ranged from "parents should buy the phone" to "the tweens should pay for the phones" themselves. However, some believed that parents should buy phones for early adolescents who have medical conditions. Ongoing care and maintenance of smart phones was a topic for debate. Some participants said if a smartphone is lost or broken, tweens should pay for replacements.

The tweens also said an early adolescent should ask for a smartphone before getting one.

"Our research indicates that giving an unrequested hand-me-down or gift phone for a first phone is not recommended," said Moreno.