

# The digital detox childhood

By Philipp Depiereux

**No gaming consoles, no video games, no free internet surfing, no tablets, and no smartphones until the age of 14.**

No access to YouTube, Netflix, or Amazon Video. Movies are only watched together with parents before the age of 14 and must be carefully selected by them. Children and teenagers should be able to play, communicate, and learn freely, without media influence. From the age of 14, teenagers are given a highly restricted and parent-monitored smartphone, along with a lending contract that clearly outlines the usage of the device: it belongs to the parents and is only lent to the teenagers. If any contract points are violated, the parents can confiscate the smartphone. The contract is signed by all "parties."

Sounds like a dream world and a "mission impossible"? My wife and I have managed to raise our four children (aged 18, 15, 10, and 7) largely free from digital devices. Without daily arguments about screen time, with plenty of creative play, and yes, sometimes boredom for the kids – because, as we know, boredom sparks creativity and new ideas.

Now, I could write pages on how we managed to raise our children digitally free, how they didn't become analog outsiders, how they weren't left behind, and how they thrived without digital devices in school, among friends, and in their everyday lives. But I want to focus on addressing the readers who likely have children and teenagers already using digital devices, encouraging them to take a step toward more digital detox times, and to face their children with courage.



## The skills of the future in the digital age

Parents often fall into the trap of thinking they need to introduce their children to smartphones and digital media as early as possible, so they can learn the necessary skills and are not left behind in life. The reality is, however, that the younger generation usually masters these devices faster than we do. In my view, it is far more important that our children learn the following seven competencies, alongside analytical and conceptual skills and a certain level of resilience:

- **Critical thinking**
- **Collaboration**
- **Communication skills**
- **Creativity**
- **Courage**
- **Empathy**
- **Social competence**

I'm confident that with these seven competencies every child will successfully navigate the (digital) future. Machines will, for the foreseeable future, be unable to develop empathy or social skills. Humans, even in the age of Artificial Intelligence (AI), robots, and machines, will continue to be

in demand for their ability to collaborate and communicate effectively.

Unfortunately, there is also bad news: our traditional education system especially in Germany, which I am its biggest critic, is not adequately preparing our children and teenagers for the future because these competencies are not included in the curriculum. And by the way, teachers don't learn these important skills during their training either. This has to change!

## Creative and communicative inability as a consequence of digitalisation in the nursery

Studies clearly show that smartphones make children hyperactive, anxious, and/or aggressive. The issues that are becoming more and more evident range from feeding and sleep disorders in babies to language development issues in toddlers, and concentration problems in Primary School children. Creativity also suffers: children can hardly focus on one task for long periods and instead want to be digitally entertained. Moreover, because of the "always-on" mode of smartphones, they are constantly in waiting mode, hoping to receive the next emoji, message, video, reel, story, or photo.

German neuroscientist Manfred Spitzer has been warning about the impact of digitalisation in children's rooms for years. His findings are equally alarming: children who are exposed to digital media too early experience "speech disorders, attention disorders, and poorer grades in reading and writing." Furthermore, media consumption leads to "loss of empathy, social adaptation difficulties, a tendency toward criminal behavior, fear of missing out, addiction, and obesity." Early digitalisation thus hampers the healthy development of children and teenagers.

## Back to childhood 1.0

In my view, society needs to become smarter and braver! The Australian government is leading the way: they have recently banned the use of social media platforms like TikTok, Instagram, and others by teenagers. I celebrate them for this!

But parents also need to play an important role. Clear rules are needed when it comes to using digital devices. There must be complete agreement between both parents on these rules. Parents must face the issue shoulder to shoulder. Smartphones should always be in the possession of the parents (after all, children and teenagers are generally not allowed to enter into contracts), and only lent to the children temporarily under a "lending and usage contract." Age restrictions, app limitations, and screen time must always be enabled, and parents must maintain full control over the devices. If rules are broken, there must be consequences, and devices should be returned to the parents for a few days or weeks, or screen time reduced. The latter can be done easily with the push of a button.

In addition to the clarity and unity of both parents, it is crucial to face children with courage. Parents must be strong, enforce rules and consequences, and confidently say "no" when necessary.

Active dialogue about media usage with children is also a clear parental responsibility: What content are the children watching? What interests them? What worries or disturbs them? Additionally, parents should →





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Wladimir Klitschko at the  
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agree with their children that smartphones and chat histories can be accessed by parents at any time if there is a reason for concern. Parents must also continue to develop their own digital competence. There are excellent videos, blog posts, and training resources on smartphone usage and screen time settings, safe internet surfing, avoiding scams, finding sources, critically assessing fake news articles, and many other topics.

And, like everything in life, the digital journey with children should follow the “build, measure, learn” method that I appreciate so much. Parents can experiment and see what works for their kids and what does not. Inspiration can also be drawn from discussions with other parents. Some use a point system for good grades, cleaning rooms, reading, and other tasks, where kids get an extra hour of screen time after reaching a certain point threshold. Others

spend completely digital-free days with their children, doing something special together. And the key word here is “together”: no matter how old children are in the digital age, parents must always discuss and explain decisions to their children and clarify why they were made. A close bond with the children is a fundamental prerequisite for raising children without smartphones or with strictly regulated digital usage.

And in all of this, my point is not to claim that there is one true way. No one will be the perfect role model when it comes to media usage, and each family must develop their own parenting style. However, parents should be aware that they can set a counterpoint. That means: children should enjoy their freedom for as long as possible and be allowed to fill their day with their own imagination.

Therefore, I urge parents: Actively engage with your children. Try birthday parties without smartphones, train journeys, car rides, and flights without iPad movies, or phone-free days at home. Sometimes it’s tempting to take a break or enjoy the much-needed peace and quiet by entertaining children with an iPad. This temptation should be resisted. Children should remain children – free to explore the world independently, not influenced and directed by machine in their thinking.

Ultimately, it’s not about being anti-technology, but about protecting the childhood of the little ones and making them competent users of all these technologies at an appropriate age.

**Be smarter & braver!**



### About the author

Philipp Depiereux is an entrepreneur and founder of the digital consultancy etventure, which he sold to the E&Y group in 2017 with over 200 employees. He is also the initiator of the non-profit initiative ChangeRider, an author, and a speaker on topics such as courage, change, digitalisation, and the digital transformation of politics, society, and business. Since 2022, he has been living in California with his wife and four children.

## BIS City Talk

# “Empowering digital citizens: smart kids vs. smartphones”



## Wednesday, 26 February 2025 (18:00)

BIS City Campus, Leopoldstr. 208, 80804 München



**Philipp Depiereux**  
Digital expert & entrepreneur



**Prof Dr Christian Montag**  
Neuroscientist & author



**Magdalena Balica**  
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International Baccalaureate  
Organization (IB)



**Dr Chrissie Sorenson**  
Head of School at BIS



**Funda Vanroy**  
Moderator (TV host “Galileo”)



The event is open to all interested guests, registration via the QR code is mandatory. Optional school tour from 17:00 – 17:45



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