

MAGAZINE

Parenting's New Frontier: What Happens When Your 11-Year-Old Says No to a Smartphone?

BY VIRGINIA HEFFERNAN

September 16, 2019

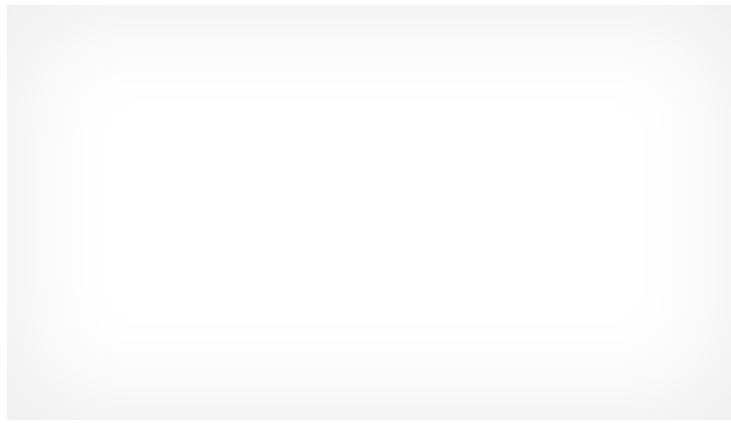


Model Arizona Muse. Photographed by Steven Klein, *Vogue*, 2015.

SAVE

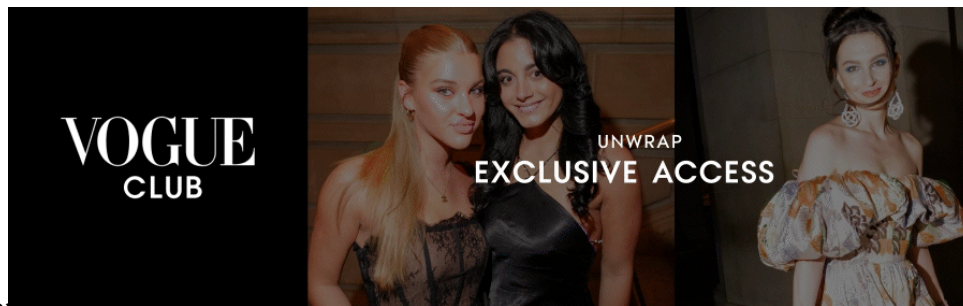
TOWARD THE BACK of my top dresser drawer—the one for pajamas—I have an iPhone 4 in a lime-green case. I bought this now-obsolete phone, refurbished, years ago, as a gift for my son on his 11th birthday. But it was never charged, never turned on, never brought blazing to life as I hoped it would be: with group texts, Instagram, Super Stickman Golf.

So the phone sits among my nightgowns, essentially deceased. I only recently acknowledged that it will never be what a phone should be—someone's steadfast companion, a guilty pleasure, a fetish object alive with the hallucinatory wonders of the entire angelic and demonic internet.



What happened is my son rejected my gift. He simply said *no* to the present I'd bought and wrapped for him. He didn't *want* a phone. He *really* didn't want a phone. As I protested that he need use it only for calls and texts, he dug in, and became emotional. *Please don't make me get a phone.* So I tucked the iPhone 4 in my drawer, assuming he'd come around. Three years later, he still hasn't.

Some of his resistance to digital culture is no doubt a reaction to my outsize embrace of it. When I was nine, in the earliest days of the internet, my family bought a terminal that could dial in to a spectacular, heaving mainframe belonging to Dartmouth College, in the center of Hanover, New Hampshire. The green letters on the black background mesmerized me, as did the crash and squeal of the modem.



My early experience of computing was pure romance. Even dialing the numbers on our rotary phone made my heart pound; forget about pressing the receiver into the acoustic coupler. When words came on the screen, I felt as if all the ideas in the world were being crushed through copper wire in my family's house in the woods, where they were now right at my fingertips. I could feel worldly just sitting in my bedroom.

Throughout middle school, I played online adventure games—many with a social element—for hours on end. I used the handle Athena. I made friends with an excellent crew of hackers, CB aficionados, metalheads, tech-curious athletes, and X-Men obsessives. Those early experiences with computers opened my imagination to new realms. They introduced me to a vast range of other minds. And they taught me the awesomely flexible and playful idiom I still encounter on Twitter.

In the early 1990s, I signed up for CompuServe and found email every bit as enchanting as the computer “conferences” I'd loved as a kid. Getting regular mail is fantastic, but suddenly letters could be exchanged so *fast*—and email brought with it new conventions that allowed for experimentation in innuendo, humor, and what were, for me at the time, uncharacteristically brave forms of expression.

In the next decade, I acquired a Motorola Razr almost the instant I saw one; then a BlackBerry; and finally an iPhone. Somewhere along the way the internet and television of my childhood merged with the mobile telephone of my young adulthood and became something magnificent, and at once, always by my side, a world of imaginative possibilities in one elegant rectangle of glass. While I've dropped many online practices and most social networks over the years, as the internet and I both change, I rarely feel guilty about using my phone. I've written about the internet for decades, from the point of view, mostly, of embrace. The digital era is where I feel at home.

WHEN MY KIDS WERE BORN, in 2005 and 2009, and I mounted photo after photo of them on Facebook with overworked captions, I envied them being born into a digital world. Lucky kids, they also had me—a chic internet habitué, not some Luddite rube afraid of her own shadow online, terrified of selfies and convinced she might restrict her household to 20 minutes a day “on the internet,” as if anyone in our time ever fully gets off.

I looked on proudly as the kids walked around our block, trying out my Google Glass (at my insistence), easily mastering the flash-in-the-pan device I'd managed to wrangle as part of a pilot program. I imagined they'd both become virtuosos at digital culture, social media, online research. They'd create formidable, indomitable avatars with vast powers and an absolute immunity to scams, trolls, and disinformation. Their avatars, one day, would heroically match wits with J.K. Rowling and Soledad O'Brien, or whatever luminaries would dominate Twitter in the future.

One thing I couldn't imagine was that one of them would reject the internet entirely.

There were warning signs. For one, from the start, my son stubbornly didn't like pop music, blockbuster movies, or slang. He didn't like seeing pictures of him, or anyone else he knew, online. Instead, he buried himself in history books and wore his pants rolled up because it was his "trademark." I swear it's not my fault. Like any good Gen X mom, I offered him Jolly Ranchers, pizza bites, and nonstop TV. He defied me. And then somewhere along the line, as he tells it, he privately decided that if he were going to maintain his integrity in middle school, he would have to stay away from phones. He set himself certain tasks in his education, and he calculated that he couldn't give up nearly seven hours per day—the national average—to phones and other screens.

For me this was a headache. His friends, when they were looking for him, had started to text me. And when he went off on his own for hours, I had no way to find him. We're used to everyone being reachable; my son is, as a rule, not. Periodically we tried to coordinate using public phones. Occasionally he'd borrow a phone from a friend of his so he could call me, but he'd keep the conversations very short—like an international call in the old days. He seems to hear a doomsday clock ticking every time he gets *near* a mobile device.

All of that led up to the birthday present. I knew my son had his reservations, but I thought it was time. Getting a phone was a middle school rite of passage among his friends. He needed one, I reasoned—and I needed him to have one. Sure, he could sound high-minded when he railed against selfies and text-speak, but what human doesn't yield to the iPhone once they get some game app or sports-highlight reels on YouTube?

Oh, was I sorely mistaken. As I learned on his birthday, my son had decided three things about smartphones. 1. They're infantilizing, a set of digital apron strings meant to attach you to your mother. (He was onto something there.) 2. They compromise a boy's resourcefulness because kids come to rely on the GPS instead of learning Scout skills. 3. They make people trivial. This final observation bugs me the most, because he still expresses it whenever he sees me jabbing at my own device: "Texty texty! Emoji emoji!" And when I play my word games, he shouts, "GAMER!" That hurts. In short, my son says, he doesn't want a phone because he wants to be free.

And so our sensibilities collided that September day when he turned 11. I have to hand it to him—in the intervening three years he has stayed his course. He uses printed maps to find his way around. He doesn't play game apps. He's joined no social media. He knows no memes. But he also seems anxious about both heated political disputes on Twitter and adolescent social life. He despises Snapchat, but he's not big on school dances either.

Here's the thing: I *still* don't feel guilty about my "screen time." (And I dislike that concept: Is it the *New York Times* app or the Marco Polos with my mother that make the screen itself so poisonous that we must limit exposure to it?) But I also don't resent my son's resistance. And I've learned from it.

I've also learned about the use of tech from my 10-year-old daughter, who likewise didn't travel the digital path I thought I'd generously blazed for her. Like my son, she lacks a phone, but she's not righteous about it. Instead, she uses mine, or a laptop, to FaceTime with friends, make iMovies, and watch baking videos. Of that much I wholeheartedly approve, of course, and we sit together, companionably, on our screens, periodically showing each other funny or offbeat stuff—my paradise. (And, I realize and respect, the nightmare of many parents.)

But my daughter will also actually bake the cakes or bread she's seen demonstrated. Her screen experience is not an end in itself. And she also has something else, something big, in common with my son: She doesn't like her picture taken and posted to Instagram. When I've done it, I say it's because I'm just proud of them and want to show them off. They both say that they never signed a waiver to let their likenesses be used for my promotional purposes.

Lately I've heard sinister rumors and ominous rumblings of a dangerous insurgency among kids who, like my own, have spent way too much of their lives being photographed for blogs, Facebook, YouTube, and other . . . promotional purposes. In France, children can now sue their parents for posting photos of them on social networks; parents can even get jail time. And lately critics, including Josephine Livingstone in *The New Republic*, have taken to task mommy influencers—with their tousled blond sun-kissed kids in back-to-school set pieces—for advertising their offspring for a bagful of swag.

Okay, okay, so kids don't want to be on social media anymore. Whatever. But seriously: What is *wrong* with young people these days? It's almost like they don't like Instagram! And have concerns about security!

THIS PAST SUMMER, to celebrate his graduation from middle school, I took my son, now 14, to Ireland. It was his request—he pictured the countryside as quiet and green, with more golf than golf apps, and just jigs rather than Just Dance.

He was right. We stayed in an Airbnb on a road so remote it didn't have a name on any map. The Wi-Fi was spotty, but more than that: I had forgotten my adapter in Dublin, so I couldn't charge my phone. At first I darted frantically around one tiny farming village, trying in vain to find one, but then something like a revelation hit me. I decided to let my phone die.

A few hours after it blinked out, the final 1% giving way to a featureless, blank screen, my son and I decided to light out for a pub about 10 minutes' walk from our cottage. Over bar snacks, we talked to locals who told us about a church we should walk to—another 15 minutes away. Dutiful tourists, we hoofed it to St. Ailbe's, a solemn-looking Gothic Revival affair in hazel-colored sandstone, on a cruciform plan.

In the strange, turquoise light of a midsummer night in County Tipperary, the remote country church looked more like a genuine sanctuary than a tourist attraction, and when I learned the site had been continuously used for religious purposes for more than 1,500 years, that made sense in my bones, even as I drew a blank about the year 519. ("That's the heyday of Constantinople!" my son said, exasperated.)

Finally, as the light dimmed, my son and I started to head back to our cottage. Early on, we hit an intersection and veered right instead of left. Thus began a walkabout in the darkening Irish countryside that lasted from 9 p.m. to 2 a.m.

The walk was psychedelic, if psychedelia can encompass both weird jokes and surpassing peace. It included one ride in a monstrous thresher; a few attempts to approach houses only to have curtains shut to us; an effort to navigate by the stars; encounters with some two dozen cows; moments of mania, panic, despair, and euphoria; some improvised songs in fake Gaelic; and a long, infinitely sweet conversation about, of all things, God.

The fairy-tale landscape, lit aslant by the sinking sun, which never entirely set, was like an all-green kaleidoscope with limitless settings. It changed to shades that, like our road, had no names.

I tried some Tolkien to lift our spirits: "Not all those who wander are——"

"Oh, we're lost," said my son. And we were.

At last two women, dressed, I swear, like nuns, picked us up and drove us home.

My uncharged phone seemed almost alien beside my bed. My son tucked in and was asleep immediately. It took me longer. For five extraterrestrial hours we had snapped the invisible strings that tether all phone-owners to the internet and its global positioning systems. One of the greatest experiences of my life—and there would never be photographs of it. My son was right. I had been something I hadn't been in years: lost and—what's more—unfindable. Or, as my wonderful phoneless walking companion would say, free.

Our bad! It looks like we're experiencing playback issues.

▶ REFRESH

MOST POPULAR VIDEOS

1 / 69



Watch the Full Vogue World: London 2023 Sho...

Vogue World: London Red Carpet Arrivals

Return of the Supers: See Behind the Scenes...

The Biggest Red Carpet Moments from the 202...

Vogue's May 2023 Cover Casts Karl Lagerfeld...

In a Vulnerable Conversation, Cara

Step Li Home

READ MORE

OPINION

Can Halloween Still Be Fun After Your 20s?

BY EMMA SPECTER

HAIR

Dua Lipa Debuts Red Hair In Keeping With the Season—
And, Perhaps, Her Forthcoming Album

BY CALIN VAN PARIS

SPONSORED CONTENT

New Ways To Charge Ahead

SPONSORED BY AWS

FASHION

The Best Fashion Instagrams of the Week: Jennifer Lopez, Jisoo, Sydney Sweeney, and More

BY CALIN VAN PARIS

OPINION

Taylor Swift and Beyoncé Hanging Out Has Officially Broken My Brain

BY EMMA SPECTER

FASHION

Kim Kardashian Is Making Nipple Bras—For a Cause

BY HANNAH JACKSON

Sponsored Links by Taboola

Volvo Has Done It Again. This Year's Lineup Has Left Us Speechless

SearchTopics

Seniors Say Goodbye To Expensive Life Insurance If You Live In These Zip Codes (Write This Down)

Senior Insurance

Here Are 23+ Hottest Gifts Of 2023

TrendingGifts

Chicago Seniors with No Life Insurance Get a \$250k Policy for \$18/month

Life Insurance

Find Results For Soc Compliance & Audit Software Platform

Yahoo Search | SOC Compliance Software

The Reimagined 2024 Outlander Might Be The Hottest SUV Of The Year

