SMARTER TECHNOLOGY. SPACE FOR DEEPER THOUGHT.

# Smarter Phones. Shallower Thinking?

*From agitation to cogitation: a parent's guide to nurturing deep thought.*

Our devices can find answers, suggest our next video and fill almost any pause. But as technology gets smarter, are we giving children enough opportunities to think for themselves? A story invites them to stay with an idea; a scrolling feed offers another reason to move on.

## Two words worth knowing

**Cogitation** means careful, deliberate thought: following an idea, weighing possibilities and reaching an understanding. Children practise it when they follow a story, consider a character's choices or work out how to build something.

**Agitation** is feeling stirred up or unsettled. It may look like restlessness, irritability, scattered attention or difficulty settling. These experiences have many possible causes; they are not a diagnosis or proof that screens are responsible.

## What do we mean by “replaced”?

Here, it means that time and opportunities for sustained thought can be crowded out by frequent checking, rapid content changes and interruptions. It does not mean a child has permanently lost the ability to think deeply.

*Smarter devices do not automatically mean deeper thinking. The invitation is to nurture our own capacities alongside the technology: attention, imagination, reflection and understanding.*

For parents of school-age children and teenagers. Adapt the ideas to your child's interests, access needs and stage of development. Suggested timings are starting points, not medical or research-prescribed targets.

THE EVIDENCE, WITHOUT THE JARGON

# What the research tells us

## 1 / Reading for pleasure is linked to stronger thinking

A study of more than 10,000 young people found that earlier, sustained reading for enjoyment was associated with better cognitive test performance and fewer mental health difficulties. Earlier reading also predicted fewer attention symptoms at follow-up. [1]

**Parent takeaway:** make room for enjoyable reading. This was mainly observational research: it does not prove that books alone caused the differences or that reading reverses social media effects. Family circumstances and other influences matter. [1]

## 2 / Frequent digital media use and attention difficulties are linked

Researchers followed 2,587 teenagers, initially without significant ADHD symptoms, for about two years. Frequent use of more kinds of digital media was associated with a modest increase in later ADHD symptoms. This covered several digital activities, not just social media. [2]

**Parent takeaway:** notice patterns of interruption. The study cannot show that screens cause ADHD, and symptoms reported in a survey are not the same as a clinical diagnosis. [2]

## 3 / A family screen break showed short-term benefits

In a Danish randomised trial involving 89 families and 181 children and adolescents, families assigned to sharply reduce leisure screen use for two weeks showed improvements in parent-rated psychological difficulties and helpful social behaviour compared with controls. [3]

**Parent takeaway:** changing family routines may help. The trial was short, parents knew their group, and the intensive limits are not a recommended everyday target. It did not establish lasting benefits or isolate social media from other screen use. [3]

These studies examine different pieces of the picture. None directly demonstrates that social media replaces book-based cogitation with agitation. That phrase is a useful lens, not an established scientific mechanism.

THE IQ QUESTION

# Are we getting less intelligent?

You may have heard that IQ scores have fallen since smartphones arrived. There is research on falling cognitive test scores, often called a **reverse Flynn effect**. It deserves attention, but the timeline and the conclusions need care.

## What the US study found

Dworak and colleagues analysed online test responses from 394,378 US adults collected during 2006-2018, with an additional set of questions available for 2011-2018. Composite scores and some reasoning scores declined; three-dimensional rotation scores improved. These were comparisons of different participants over time, not evidence that the same people became less intelligent. [6]

**What it cannot tell us:** this was a self-selected online adult sample, not a representative study of all children or humanity. It did not establish smartphone use as the cause. The date 2011 marks the start of one question set, not a demonstrated smartphone turning point. [6]

## The decline did not begin everywhere in 2011

A Norwegian study found a reversal after the 1975 birth cohort among men tested around age 18-19. That places the initial downturn in testing well before smartphones. Comparisons between brothers supported environmental explanations, but could not identify which environmental changes caused it. [7]

The iPhone itself was introduced in 2007, not 2011; smartphones were already in existence. There is no single global smartphone introduction date that explains the IQ findings. [8]

## What this means for parents

IQ test trends, sustained attention and emotional agitation are different things. These studies do not prove a chain from smartphones to agitation to lower IQ. They do give us reason to ask thoughtful questions about the environments in which thinking develops.

*Our practical focus: give children regular opportunities to read, reason, imagine and reflect. The six steps that follow offer places to begin.*

UNDERSTANDING THE PULL

# Designed to keep us engaged

Infinite scroll removes the end of the page. Autoplay begins the next video. Notifications invite us back. Personalised recommendations keep offering something that might interest us. A major National Academies review describes these as persuasive design features that can extend time on platforms. [4]

**The design goal we can support with evidence is continued engagement.** It is too strong to claim that distress is always the intended result. The same review found insufficient evidence to conclude that social media causes population-wide changes in adolescent health; experiences and effects vary. [4]

## Why reading offers something different

Following a book asks a reader to hold details in mind, connect events and imagine what is not directly shown. Pausing to consider a character's motives creates an opportunity for deliberate thought. This is the practical reasoning behind this guide, rather than proof that every book calms every child.

The useful distinction is the activity and its context: a long story on an e-reader can invite sustained attention; a printed book can be too difficult or upsetting. Screens can also support learning, creativity, friendship and accessibility.

## A conversation to try

*“Some apps make it easy to keep going. Have you noticed how you feel afterwards? I'd like us to make a little more room for things we enjoy without interruptions. What would you choose?”*

## Notice with curiosity

Look for patterns in your own child: What were they doing? What was happening before it? How was their sleep? Is stopping harder with some activities than others? Listen to their account alongside your observations.

A restless child may need movement, connection, food, rest or support before they can settle with a book. Begin with what they need, rather than treating reading as a correction.

SIX GENTLE STEPS / 1-3

# Help reading take root

## 01 / Begin with connection

Invite your child to choose a small shared experiment. Ask what they enjoy about their favourite videos, games or stories, then look for books with similar themes. For a teenager, agree the routine together and respect privacy. For a younger child, offer two inviting choices.

**Try today:** “Would you like a funny story, an animal adventure or a book about something you love?”

## 02 / Make the doorway wide

Let comics, graphic novels, poetry, fact books and rereading favourites count. Visit the library and let your child browse without a reading-level test. A book within comfortable reach is more inviting than one chosen only because it is “good for them”.

Read aloud at any age. Audiobooks and shared listening can welcome children into stories, especially when decoding print is tiring. They support story engagement, although listening is not identical to practising independent reading. Accessible formats and e-readers can help too.

**Try today:** put two or three appealing books where your child already likes to sit.

## 03 / Grow a small, predictable ritual

Start with five or ten comfortable minutes after a familiar moment, such as a snack or bath. Read beside them, or take turns reading aloud. Adults put their own phones aside too. Finish while the experience still feels welcoming; build gradually if your child wants more.

**Try today:** “After tea, let's have ten minutes for our books. I'll bring mine.”

## If your child resists

Make the next invitation smaller: one page, one poem or a story you tell aloud. Avoid using reading as a punishment or making every chapter a comprehension test. If reading remains unusually difficult, speak with their teacher about appropriate support.

SIX GENTLE STEPS / 4-6

# Make room for thought

## 04 / Leave space for wondering

Pause occasionally for an open question: “Why do you think they did that?” or “What else could happen?” Let your child disagree, ask their own question or simply enjoy the story. A little silence gives an idea time to unfold.

**Try today:** invite them to draw an alternative ending, tell the story from another character's view or connect it with something in their own life.

## 05 / Take thinking beyond the page

Choose screenfree activities that invite planning, patience and reflection: building a den, making a recipe, growing seeds, doing a jigsaw, playing a board game or creating a nature journal. Ask: “What's your plan? What changed? What might you try next?”

Outdoors, notice one tree, cloud or small creature together. Sketch it, describe it or invent its story. A small adult study found less repetitive negative thinking after a 90-minute nature walk than an urban walk. This is encouraging, but it does not prove the same result in children or prescribe a walking time. [5]

## 06 / Give attention a little shelter

Agree a regular screenfree pocket of the day. Silence non-essential notifications and turn off autoplay where possible. Give devices a shared resting place during reading and family activities. Offer a gentle warning before a transition, and have something appealing ready afterwards.

Protect time for sleep, movement, friendships and unhurried play. For teenagers, plan changes around valued friendships and support. Keep accessibility, communication and school needs in view.

## A seven-day invitation

Each day, try **a few minutes of shared reading + one screenfree activity**. Before and afterwards, invite a word or drawing about how it felt. At the end of the week ask: “What did we enjoy? What helped us settle? What shall we keep?” This is a family experiment, not a test or treatment.

KEEP THIS PAGE FOR LATER

# A small plan. A sound foundation.

## Our family's starting point

Our reading moment will be: _____

The story or subject we will try: _____

Our screenfree activity will be: _____

The change adults will make too: _____

We will check in together on: _____

## When a little more support is needed

If distress, sleep problems or attention difficulties persist or interfere with everyday life, speak with your child's teacher or GP. Reading and screenfree time can be supportive parts of family life; they do not replace individual help.

SOURCES AND FURTHER READING

# Research behind this guide

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Prepared by Ian Banyard for Screenfreehub | October 2026
Practical activities are suggestions, not a clinically validated programme.