



FREE RESOURCE · PARENTHOOD & NESTING

The Algorithm Explained

*Understanding what is happening in your child's
brain, so you can meet it with confidence.*

Clear · Grounded · Genuinely useful

Informed parents make better decisions than frightened ones.

This guide is written to give you something more useful than worry. Clarity leads to better parenting decisions than fear does, and on this subject there is already a great deal of fear in circulation.

What follows is an explanation. How these platforms are built, what they are designed to achieve, and what is happening in your child's developing brain while they use them.

Once you understand the mechanism, something shifts. The conversation with your child moves from rules to reality. And a child who understands why something is built to hold their attention becomes genuinely capable of navigating it, in a way that no instruction to put the phone down can ever achieve.

*It is us, the parents,
who should raise our children.
Not a predatory algorithm.*

WHERE TO BEGIN

Your child's brain is doing exactly what a healthy adolescent brain is designed to do. It is working beautifully.

These platforms were engineered, deliberately and expertly, around that design. Knowing this is what allows you to work with your child rather than against the current.

That distinction matters enormously. It is what separates a child who carries shame about their own behaviour from a child who understands the machinery at work and can begin making genuine choices about it.

A brain built for connection.

The human brain continues developing until roughly the age of twenty-five. Crucially, it does not develop evenly, and understanding the sequence explains almost everything.

01 Social connection runs at full power

During puberty, the brain's reward system and social evaluation circuits run at full power. Hotter, in fact, than they ever will again in adult life. Adolescent brains show stronger activation in the reward centre in response to social rewards than adult brains do.

Your teenager does not simply *enjoy* connection with their peers. Neurologically, they are built for it. Belonging, at that age, sits close to survival. This is healthy, and it is the engine of everything they will learn about being human.

02 Regulation is still being built

The prefrontal cortex, responsible for impulse control, weighing long-term consequences, and recognising when someone is trying to persuade you, is the last region to mature.

It is still being built throughout adolescence and into the mid-twenties. This is not a deficiency. It is a construction schedule, and it is the same for every human being who has ever lived.

WHAT THIS MEANS IN PRACTICE

High sensitivity to social reward. Regulation still developing.

This is a normal, universal stage of human development, present in every generation before this one. What is new is that these platforms are built precisely for this window. Your child needs a regulating presence while their own is still forming, and that presence is you.

This is why willpower alone is not the answer, and why asking for it sets a child up to fail. What works is external structure and honest understanding, held by you, until their own capacity for regulation catches up. It will.

Four mechanisms, deliberately designed.

None of what follows is accidental. Each is a design decision, tested and refined by teams of engineers and behavioural scientists. Once you can see them, they lose a great deal of their power.

01 The unpredictable reward

The most powerful way to build a habit is not to reward every time. It is to reward unpredictably. Sometimes the refresh brings something wonderful. Sometimes nothing. That uncertainty is precisely what keeps the hand reaching.

It is the same mechanism that makes slot machines profitable. Your child's brain, with its heightened sensitivity to reward, responds to it more strongly than yours does. Naming this out loud, together, is often the single most useful conversation you can have.

02 The infinite scroll

There is no bottom of the page. No natural ending. Every stopping point has been engineered out.

Stopping requires a decision, and decisions require the prefrontal cortex. By removing every natural pause where that decision might occur, the design removes the very moment your child needs in order to choose. Restoring those pauses, deliberately, is something you can do together.

03 The social scoreboard

Likes, views, follower counts. A public, numerical, real-time measure of social worth, delivered to a brain that is developmentally primed to care about social standing above almost anything else.

Positive feedback activates reward and emotional processing regions. Rejection activates the regions associated with physical pain. This is not a metaphor. The neural signature is real, and knowing this helps you take your child seriously when something online genuinely hurts them.

04 The personalised feed

The algorithm learns what holds your particular child's attention, then offers more of it. It does not evaluate whether that content serves them. It optimises for one thing: time spent.

If distress holds attention longer than joy, and it often does, the system will learn to offer distress. This is worth explaining to your child directly. Most find it clarifying rather than frightening.

What the research can tell us.

The evidence is still developing, and it is worth being honest about that. Several findings, however, are now consistent enough to act on with confidence.

01 Attention

Repeated exposure to short-form video is associated with reduced sustained attention. The encouraging half of this finding is the principle underneath it: the brain becomes what it practises. Which means it responds just as readily to practice in the other direction.

02 Emotional regulation

Adolescents who check habitually show measurable differences in the amygdala, the brain's emotion centre, and in the regions governing judgement. These differences develop over time, alongside the habit. What develops over time can also be reshaped over time.

03 Sleep

Perhaps the most under-discussed factor of all. Sleep is the foundation beneath emotional regulation, learning, immune function and mood. Which also makes it the single most powerful lever available to you.

04 The displacement effect

Unhurried play, time in nature, face-to-face relationship and even boredom are the conditions under which the human brain develops best. Every hour spent scrolling is an hour drawn from that account.

Which means the most important question is often not what the screen *does*, but what it replaces. And that is entirely within your influence.

HOLDING THIS IN PROPORTION

Correlation is not causation, and this science is young. Children differ, and technology holds genuine value in their lives.

What is clear is that the design is deliberate, the developmental window is real, and the conversation is well worth having properly.

What actually works.

Understanding changes behaviour in a way that rules alone never will. What lasts is a young person who genuinely grasps how the design works, and who has something in their life that nourishes them more than the alternative can.

Explain the machinery

Children resist being frightened. They rarely resist being respected. Show them how the unpredictable reward works. Most teenagers find it genuinely interesting, and slightly infuriating, to discover they are being engineered. That indignation is useful. It belongs to them.

Name the design, not the child

"This is built to be hard to put down" lands very differently from "why can't you put that down." The first makes you allies against a common design. The second makes your child the problem, and children who feel like the problem stop telling you things.

Protect sleep above all else

If you do one thing, do this. Devices out of the bedroom overnight. It is the highest-leverage decision available to you, it improves everything downstream of it, and it requires no argument about screen time at all.

Build the alternative

The algorithm is competing for a real need: belonging, stimulation, rest. When a child has genuine connection, unhurried presence and real belonging at home, the algorithm simply has less to offer them. This is the most effective thing you can build, and only you can build it.

Model it honestly

Your child is watching your relationship with your own phone far more closely than they are listening to your rules about theirs. This is the most demanding line in this document, and also the most hopeful, because it is entirely within your gift.

Stay in the conversation

This is not one conversation. It is an ongoing dialogue, revisited as they grow. The goal was never compliance. It is a young person who can eventually hold this themselves, which is precisely what you are building, one conversation at a time.

Six questions that open a door.

These invite genuine dialogue rather than defensiveness. Ask them with curiosity rather than as a test, and be ready to receive whatever answer arrives. Being genuinely listened to is often the intervention.

"How do you feel after you've been scrolling for a while?"

Not whether it is good or bad. Simply what they notice in themselves. Awareness is the first step, and it belongs to them.

"Do you ever feel like it's hard to stop, even when you want to?"

This makes the experience shared rather than shameful. Most adults feel this too. Say so.

"Who do you think decides what shows up on your feed?"

A genuinely fascinating conversation for most young people, and often a revelation.

"Does it ever change how you feel about yourself?"

Ask gently. Then be quiet, and let the silence do its work.

"If the app was designed to keep you there as long as possible, how would it do that?"

Let them work it out themselves. What they discover independently, they own.

"What would you want to be different about it?"

This hands them agency. It moves them from subject to author.

*Your child is not waiting
for a better parent.
They are waiting for you.*

WHAT COMES NEXT

You are not competing with a screen. You are offering something it can never give.

Presence. Attunement. The experience of being genuinely
known by someone who is not optimising for your
attention, but simply glad that you exist.

No algorithm can offer that. It is the one thing you have
that they never will. And it has always been enough.

Conscious parenting is not
perfect parenting.
It is parenting with
your eyes open.

BOOK YOUR EXPLORATORY SESSION

45 minutes · No commitment · Online globally or in person in Lisbon

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