

# Taking the Phone

## Without the Meltdown

Why it happens. What works. Scripts to use.

For toddlers 12 months — 3 years

### Why it always ends in tears

Screens release dopamine. Taking a phone mid-watch is literally removing a dopamine source mid-hit. Your toddler's brain is not being dramatic — it is responding to a genuine neurological jolt.

Add to this: toddlers have zero concept of time, transitions are biologically hard at this age, and they cannot self-regulate. The meltdown is not manipulation. It is what a small brain does.

### 4 things that never work (and why)

#### "One more minute"

Every time you say it, you teach them limits are negotiable.

#### Asking instead of telling

"Can we put it away?" invites negotiation. "Time to put it away" does not.

#### Grabbing it suddenly

Surprise removal escalates the nervous system instantly. Slow and warned works better.

### What's inside

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# The System That Works

Two techniques. Use both together.

## 1. The Warning System

Give three warnings before you take it. Every time. Your toddler's brain cannot predict the end without help. You are giving it a countdown that makes the transition survivable.

5 min

Say it out loud. Point to a timer. "Five more minutes, then the phone goes away."

2 min

Come close, get to their level. "Two more minutes. Almost time."

Last

Eye level. "Last one. When this video finishes, we are done."

Tip: Use a visual timer. When toddlers can SEE time running out, it lands differently.

## 2. The Swap Technique

Have something ready to put in their hand THE MOMENT the phone comes away. Already in your hand. The swap must happen within 3 seconds. An empty hand is the problem.

- **Snack**

Raisins, biscuit, rice cake. In your hand as you take the phone.

- **A special toy**

Kept only for this moment. Only comes out when the phone goes away.

- **An activity**

Stickers, playdough, puzzle. On the table waiting before you start.

The combination: Warning + swap = dramatically fewer meltdowns. Neither works as well alone.

**The warning prepares the brain. The swap fills the empty hand. Use both, every time.**

Doing both consistently trains the brain over 1-2 weeks. It gets noticeably easier.

## Scripts — Exactly What to Say

Short, warm and consistent. Same words every time — they become a ritual.

### 12–18 months

Keep it to 3 words max. No explanations. Repeat identically each time.

**Warning:** "All done soon."

**Taking it:** "All done! Phone away. Here — [swap]."

### 18 months – 2 years

Simple sentences. Name the warning. Follow through every time.

**5 min:** "Five minutes and phone goes away."

**2 min:** "Two more minutes."

**Taking it:** "Time's up. Phone away. You can have [swap]."

**Protests:** "I know you're sad. Phone is all done."

### 2 – 3 years

Name what comes NEXT. Give them something to move toward.

**5 min:** "Five minutes left. Then we are going to [activity]."

**2 min:** "Two minutes. Get ready — [activity] is next."

**Taking it:** "Time's up. Phone away. Good watching."

**Begs more:** "Not now. Phone is done."

## When the Meltdown Happens Anyway

Even with warnings and the swap — sometimes it still goes wrong. Here is what to do.

### What to do when it melts down

#### Do not give it back. Ever.

Not once. Giving it back teaches that meltdown = phone returned.

#### Do not explain mid-meltdown

A toddler in meltdown cannot process language. Wait until calm.

#### Stay calm, stay close

Be near. Be quiet. Do not match their energy. Do not bargain.

### My Phone Takeway Plan

Fill in your version. Same words each time builds the routine.

**My 5-minute warning words:**

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**My 2-minute warning words:**

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**My swap item (always ready):**

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**What I say when I take it:**

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The meltdown is not about you. It is dopamine withdrawal in a brain that cannot self-regulate yet.

Your consistency now builds their ability to handle transitions for years to come.