

Parents' little helper

The phone that blocks Facebook.

Digital life

John Davidson



It's back-to-school time, and you know what that means, don't you?

For those of us lucky enough not to have school-age children, it means a return to horrible morning and afternoon traffic, but, on the upside, a return to footpaths that aren't overrun by horrible little monsters.

And for those of us lucky enough to have school-age children, it means a return to horrible morning and afternoon traffic, but, on the upside, living rooms that aren't overrun by darling little cherubs.

For many parents, it's also a time when you're forced to reconsider that age-old conundrum, should you be getting your kids a smartphone?

On the one hand, schools increasingly rely on internet access for their curriculum, and kids increasingly rely on them to organise sport and actual, real-world social events. Not to mention, phones can come in handy when there's an emergency, like when little Johnny is too shy to ask his best friend's parents for a lift home from rugby, and finds himself having to walk two hours in football boots to get home.

On the other hand, too much screen time is known to produce sullen humans with severe gaming/gambling/narcissism/attention-deficit/Instagram/Facebook/you-name-it-phones-probably-cause-it-disorders, and handing a phone to a child can often amount to a zero-sum sanity transplant, with the parents as the beneficiary and the children as the unwitting donors.

Oh, and phones can cost a lot, and kids lose or break them all the time. Like, all the time. It's nuts.

Which is where this week's review comes in.

It's of the Alcatel FZ One, an Android phone that's not only inexpensive enough that your darling kids could lose or break 10 of them before it costs you as much as one iPhone. It also comes with a feature that we think could actually give your kids a chance to grow up relatively unscathed by phones.

That feature is the Mobile Zone cyber safety application by the Australian company Family Zone, which on the FZ One is built right into the firmware of the phone, preventing kids from doing dangerous things with their phones, like looking at porn, playing games when they should be studying or sleeping, or installing addictive,



psychologically damaging apps such as Facebook or Instagram.

(Mobile Zone can be added to other phones, of course, just like any other app, but like any other app it can be uninstalled, too, undermining its efficacy. On the FZ One, it's pre-installed in such a way it can't be uninstalled by the usual means, making it much, much harder to bypass. Doubtless someone will figure out how to "root" the FZ One to bypass the app, but that's a lot of effort to go to just to stare

At Sleep time, pretty well nothing on the phone will work – a default setting.

mindlessly at Instagram. Besides, parents get notified when the phone is rooted, so it's a hack that may not even last the hour.)

The phone itself is just an Alcatel 3, with a perfectly presentable 720 x 1440 pixel, 5.5-inch screen, a perfectly adequate MediaTek MT6739 chipset, a perfectly fine 13-megapixel rear camera and features such as a rear fingerprint reader and a face unlocking that belie the sub-\$200 price tag.

I've been using it for four days now, and honestly it wouldn't kill me if I had to use it longer. It's not great at high-end games (it benchmarks like a Samsung Galaxy S5 from 2014), but that's kind of the point of this phone.

You buy it in the hope (however forlorn it may ultimately prove to be) that your kids won't end up so addicted to games that they end up so sleep-deprived they barely pass school, drop out of uni, and

Alcatel's FZ One comes with Family Zone cyber safety built into the firmware.



leach off you until they're 45 years old.

Though, it's not primarily through the limited processor power that you hope to achieve that goal. It's through limits imposed by the Mobile Zone app, which offers parents a range of ways to control the usage of the phone, ranging from blocking entire classes of apps and websites altogether, to restricting access to those apps and websites to reasonable times.

The FZ One comes with a 12-month subscription to the Family Zone platform, upon which the Mobile Zone app has been built, which will cost you \$5.95 a month on top of whatever mobile phone plan you choose, once that 12 months is over.

The Family Zone cyber safety system is based around age profiles for apps and content – 0-8, 9-12, 13-15, 16-17, 18-20 and adult – and these age profiles are then divided into four time periods each day – School, Study, Play and Sleep.

You can tailor these to suit yourself, but when you first set up the phone, setting up a child and a parent account in Family Zone,

it comes with restrictions that, for instance, allow 9- to 12-year-olds to access content about "vehicles" during Play time, but not during School, Study or Sleep time; that never allow access to content related to

alcohol; that restricts YouTube and TikTok usage to "Play" time; and that allows the camera to be used.

At Sleep time, pretty well nothing on the phone will work: a default setting that, as much as any other feature on the FZ One, will dramatically increase your chances of having your kids well rested and out of your hair by the age of 25.

Of course, all of these settings can be adjusted, both in terms of when the various time periods kick in, and in terms of what's permissible in any given time period. You could set the FZ One so sleep time starts the moment you get home, and so it can never access sites about religion, never ever, not even during study time, for instance.

The kids on the receiving end of all your draconian restrictions do get a bit of wiggle room though.

At any given time, they can request that you temporarily shift them into

a different time classification, so that, for instance, they can play games on their phone if the teacher doesn't turn up to class, and that request will appear in the parent's email inbox and in the Family Zone web-based control panel, to be promptly ignored by parents who have other things to do.

Kids on locked-down phones can also request access to websites, just in case (for instance) they're in a biology class and unexpectedly need to access porn.com.

It all seems to work very well indeed, except for requesting access to blocked websites, which can be a little fiddly.

Requesting access to porn.com, for instance, never opened up that site no matter what we did in the parental control panel, and it wasn't until we requested www.porn.com that we were able to get through the blockade.

But, you know, kids are smart. They'll figure out how to request access to precisely the right URL at precisely the time you're at your most vulnerable.

You just need to stay strong.

Setting up the parent account using an email address you never, ever look at would probably help, too. **DL**

Twitter @DL.Labs



Alcatel FZ One Smartphone

Likes Very good value for money, very promising cyber-safety platform.

Dislikes Old-fashioned USB connector

Price \$199