Smart Gifting

When considering a technology related gift, it's important to research not just the price and features of the device, but also its digital safety, especially if it's for a child. Your best intentions to express your love or friendship with a thoughtful gift, can turn counterproductive if it compromises the safety of your recipient or their family.

Many popular gadgets, like MP3 players, gaming consoles, cameras, and drones, may seem fun and harmless but can include features like video playback or even hidden access to WIFI and unfiltered internet.

If you're considering a tablet, iPad, or other smart device for your child or family, make sure to check what internet filters and parental controls are available to ensure the safest digital experience.

To avoid surprises or unnecessary disappointment, TAG can guide you and provide a list of safe devices to help you make informed decisions before you shop. If you have a specific model in mind, feel free to contact us to find out if it's safe or to explore your options for securing it. A little research goes a long way in keeping your family and home digitally secure.

Don't miss our buyer's guide to smart gift giving →

COMING SOON: This year's TAG Baltimore Chanukah "Screen Free for 30" program - Over 1600 participants last year!

Buyer's Guide to Smart Gift Giving

The goal of this guide is to inform you of the potential risks and benefits of various popular technology gifts. It is not intended to endorse any of these products or to encourage giving them as gifts. Ultimately, it is up to you to use your own discretion when deciding what is an appropriate gift for your family and friends.

MP3 Players

Touch screen music players are usually powered by Android software, just like Android smartphones. Unfortunately, most of these MP3 players lack proper security measures, allowing them to access the internet when connected to a WIFI network.

One such player, the *Timkoo*, while advertised as "kosher," provides easy access to Google, YouTube and the internet with just a few taps, even if your child is not tech savvy. Our website has a list of safe MP3 players, including ones from which we can remove the radio. Feel free to email us to double check the model you're considering.

Streaming Devices: 24six, Zing, etc.

While these devices don't appear to have internet vulnerabilities, they do require WIFI access periodically for updates. They also have an internet-like experience, modeled after apps like Spotify. The "Solo" audio-only player highlights trending music and popular playlists, while the "Family" video capable model has playlist sharing, music videos, and podcasts - some with sensitive topics not for children. The devices are constantly updating, so it's unclear what new features may be introduced in the future. Very different than simple mp3 players, they are much more internet-dependent and engaging, plus the unlimited access to music has led to constant song-hopping and overstimulation. Parents should consider whether these features are a proper fit for their family's needs.

On the flip side, these devices are a welcome alternative to the highly objectionable content on Spotify and Apple Music. They offer exclusively Jewish content, and prevent a child from loading other types of music or videos on to the player. Parental controls also help limit the content.

Cameras

Some cameras have open internet, while others, especially touch-screen ones, have hidden internet capabilities, even if that's not listed in the product description. Many cameras have a special WIFI function allowing sharing photos with other cameras. WIFI or video features can be removed from specific models of cameras. See our website for a list.

There are many cameras available that have no internet connectivity. Read their product descriptions carefully, and feel free to reach out to our office to check whether the model you're considering is safe.

Fitbits, Smartwatches

Some smartwatches, Apple watches, or Fitbits are just wearable smartphones, with unfiltered internet. Others can only connect to the internet when connected to the app on another smart device, while others do not connect to the internet at all. Read the product details and check with a technician to see how safe the device is.

Some of these devices can also connect with other smartwatch or Fitbit users through the device's social features. Socializing with strangers and immodest profile pictures can be a concern. Smartwatches have also been found to be a children's gateway to the smart device and screen dependent culture.

Walkie Talkies

Some of these have access to AM and FM radio. It's not possible to remove the radio capabilities as they are directly tied to the function of the Walkie Talkie.

Gaming Devices

Many gaming devices, including the Nintendo Switch and DS, Xbox, and Meta Quest VR, pose internet safety risks like open YouTube, an app store, or a full browser. Many of these also allow multi-player gaming, playing and interacting with strangers on the internet. WIFI on some devices can be physically removed or disabled by a technician. If WIFI is removed, download all desired games beforehand, as updates and downloads will no longer be possible. Parental controls are available for some gaming devices, but they are often weak and easily bypassed.

Drones

Many drone remote controls come with screens and unfiltered access to websites like YouTube, or the entire unfiltered internet, when connected to WIFI. They can also allow users to upload and share videos online. Even securely filtered drones can become compromised after a software update. Some drones use a smartphone app, and while your smartphone might be filtered, all filters have vulnerabilities a young adult with enough unsupervised time can learn to exploit.

There are also major privacy concerns with drone video cameras as children may use them to film private areas like backyards, pools, and windows.

Currently the only way to block internet is by physically removing the WIFI from the drone. Most drones will continue to work without WIFI, but it's best to verify this with the manufacturer.

Cricut Machines

Using these machines require the Cricut app, which can work on a laptop PC, but requires internet. Your internet filter settings might need a special bypass for the app to work, which means the Cricut app itself will be unfiltered, including its clip art, design ideas, and its social media features that connect with other users worldwide. The app does have objectionable content, especially for children. Some safer machines that do not need an app are the Silhouette Cameo, which still needs a PC, and the Brother ScanNCut, which works without a PC.

Tablets and Kindles

The Amazon Kindle/Fire series, while often more budget-friendly, has internet that cannot be filtered properly. They do include basic parental controls, but they're limited and can be bypassed easily, especially by tech-savvy kids or their friends. On the Amazon Fire model, internet can be blocked by permanently removing the WIFI chip. All apps, books, and games would need to be pre-loaded, and would have to able to work offline. This method doesn't prevent material from being loaded through USB. In most cases, our TAG office can remove the WIFI chip for free.

For those who want internet on their tablet, we generally recommend an Android tablet or iPad so a reliable filter can be installed. A decent tablet or refurbished iPad can cost as low as $80-$150 and the filter is usually just a few dollars a month if you only want apps and no browser.

Game Apps

Besides the obvious screen time and addictiveness concerns, other significant risks are the competing and interacting with other players online. While this makes the games more exciting it also opens up the possibility for bad actors to bully or prey on other players.

The *Roblox* app is one example of a risky game app. It offers a wide range of games created by community contributors, but has been criticized for leaving children vulnerable to ill-intentioned strangers. Exposure to highly inappropriate content through the games themselves or through communication with other players is another concern. Some apps are monitored by developers, but they can't always keep up with the newly posted games, plus parents are ultimately trusting their child's safety to these companies' own standards and vigilance.

Many gaming apps, especially free ones, have highly inappropriate advertisements that popup during the game, and the games sometimes reward the players with points for watching the ads.

Some apps have parental controls, but they're not entirely foolproof. To be safe, research and test every game before giving it to your child.

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COME VISIT US! CURRENT HOURS: SUNDAY THROUGH THURSDAY – 8-9:30PM | DAYTIME HOURS AVAILABLE BY APPOINTMENT ONLY

TAG Baltimore in Your Neighborhood

TAG staff and volunteers at Merkaz Torah U'Tefila, Rabbi Eichenstein's Shul, for the Elul all-day Shul filter drive

TAG visited the Bnos Yisroel and Bais Yaakov schools for personalized Digital Safety Counseling (DSC) meetings. These sessions were designed to help staff and parents evaluate the safety of the devices in their homes and prescribe a course of action to upgrade their methods and protections.

Additionally, TAG has organized several successful walk-in filter drives at local Shuls, assisting Shul-goers on their way to or from Davening and learning—even in a tent in the pouring rain!

Contact TAG to have your school's administration or Shul reach out to TAG to schedule a DSC or filter drive for your Shul or school!

TAG Baltimore Internet Kiosks

TAG has joined with the kosher kiosk company *Outworx* to now offer internet kiosks, with filtered internet, to the community. Users register for an account and pay a nominal fee for time on the computer. Many families and students have already been using and benefiting from the service.

Current Kiosk Hours:
**Monday - Thursday: 12 - 5PM**
Sunday - Thursday: 8 - 9:30PM

Old Device Disposal

The TAG office now provides a secure and private service that benefits your home, TAG, and 3rd world countries!

A local refurbishing company has partnered with TAG to repurpose used devices, and in return TAG receives a donation for each device.

Keeping old, unfiltered devices in your home is unsafe, especially with curious children around. If you're no longer using a device, bring it to TAG's drop box—just remember to reset it first.
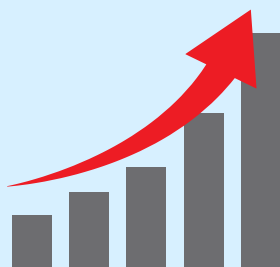
TAG Baltimore this past year by the numbers:

- **2,422** consultations
- **4,452** support emails researched and responded to
- **2,580** phone calls
- **6,989** hours of open office service
- **2,052** devices serviced — each impacting lives in our community