

Common Sense on Cell Phones

Cell phones aren't just for talking anymore

You rarely see young people these days without a cell phone in their hands. But they're probably not talking on it. More likely, they're texting, surfing the Web, updating their Facebook pages, playing games, downloading apps, playing with ring tones, taking pictures, recording video, and more.

When you hand your children cell phones, you're giving them powerful communications and media production tools. They can create text, images, and videos that can be widely distributed and uploaded to Web sites instantly. If you think your kids' technological savvy is greater than their ability to use it wisely, pay attention to the gap. We're still the parents. And it's our job to say, "No, not yet."

Some facts

Cell phones are the #1 form of communication for teens (*Pew, 2010*).

More kids have cell phones than ever before, including 31% of 8- to 10-year-olds, 69% of 11- to 14-year-olds and 85% of 15- to 18-year-olds (*Kaiser, 2010*).

Teens text more than they talk — averaging 3,146 text messages a month, compared with 203 calls (*Neilsen, 2010*).

1 in 3 teens use their phones to browse the Web (*Harris Interactive, 2009*).

Parents have to teach responsible cell phone use

Cell phones give kids access to a world that's both portable and private. Unlike when they talk on the phone at home, with a cell phone you're not there to monitor what they're saying or sending, or whom they're talking to.

Unfortunately, this access means that kids can use these powerful communication tools irresponsibly. They may text when they should be paying attention to what's going on around them. They may engage in sexting, by sending or receiving inappropriate pictures or messages. Embarrassing texts, photos, and videos captured on phones can be sent instantly or uploaded easily to Web sites. This form of cyberbullying can happen swiftly and anonymously.

A few other things to be aware of: Texting has also led to cheating in class, as kids noiselessly text answers to one another. Your children may text late into the night because you won't hear them. Cell phones can distract kids from what's going on around them and can be expensive. Mobile phones, and the monthly plans that support texting and Web access, can cost a small fortune.

What's the right age for your child to have a cell phone?

Cell phones have become a must-have for kids, and the ways kids use them are not always obvious to parents. If you answer "yes" to most of the following questions, it may be time to get a cell phone for your children.

- » Are your kids pretty independent?
- » Do your children need to be in touch for safety reasons?
- » Would having easy access to friends benefit them for social reasons?
- » Do you think they'll use a cell phone responsibly — for example, not texting during class or disturbing others with their phone conversations?
- » Can they adhere to limits you set for minutes talked and apps downloaded?
- » Will they use the text, photo, and video functions responsibly and not to embarrass or harass others?

Parent tips for elementary school kids

- » **Ask yourself: Do they really need a phone?** If you decide that they do, ask yourself what kind of phone they need. For very young children, there are phones that you can program with just a few important phone numbers. For older elementary school kids, you might want to choose a phone that allows for calls but not texting or instant messaging (IM).
- » **Make sure young kids understand the rules.** If your kids have phones, make sure you have programmed everyone's numbers into the phones so that the phones display the names of who is calling. Tell your kids not to answer calls from numbers they don't know. Make rules for time spent talking, what phones are used for, and when the phones should be off. You may want to check the time of calls to make sure they are made within your established boundaries.

Parent tips for preteens

- » **Make sure you have the right plan for calls or texts.** Phone plans range in minutes and texts allowed. If you allow your preteens to text, get a plan with unlimited texting or you'll face huge bills.
- » **Explain that cell phone are expensive and that "extras" cost money.** You may be billed for ring tones, sports updates, or Web access.
- » **Work out guidelines for use with your kids.** No phones in class, phones turned off at night, and no phones at the dinner table are a few common ones.
- » **Make sure your kids are using phones appropriately.** That means no rude or sexy texts, no embarrassing photos or videos. Monitoring messages sent and received is not a terrible idea (although your children will probably think it is).
- » **Talk about cyberbullying.** Tell your kids to come to you if anything like that happens.
- » **Tell your children that sexual talk of any kind is not allowed.** Kids often jokingly use sexual language and sexually aggressive speech. Yet, on a cell phone, a message can be instantly forwarded out of context to anyone, and kids can get into all kinds of trouble.
- » **Establish real consequences for violations of your rules.** Like taking away the phones for a week!

Parent tips for teens

- » **No texting or talking while driving.** Never. Distracted driving is how kids get into traffic accidents — the #1 killer of teens. It's also illegal in a growing number of states.
- » **Make sure they pick up your call.** Many teens treat incoming calls from Mom and Dad as a nuisance. As long as you are paying the bills, make a rule: They have to answer when you call — unless they're behind the wheel.
- » **Have them review each month's bill.** Let them see precisely how many minutes they are spending on the phone or texting.
- » **Make sure you anticipate increased phone use.** By the time your children get to high school, the phone is ringing all the time. Make sure their phone plan allows for this extra time, and establish limits so they get a break from being "always on."
- » **Draw boundaries.** No phones at the dinner table. In the car. In a restaurant. Remind your teens that they have only a couple of years left at home to have annoying conversations with you face to face!

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