

# The Cell Phone Dilemma

## The Cell Phone

“When can I have a cell phone?” If you have not already been faced with that question, you soon will be. Research shows that 22 percent of children between the ages of 6-9, 60 percent of tweens, and 84 percent of teenagers have cell phones. Cell phones can be a very useful tool for busy parents to keep in touch with their equally busy children, but there are potential downsides that need to be considered before getting your child a cell phone or allowing your child to use his or her phone without clearly set limits if they already have one.

On the plus side, cell phones offer both parents and children the security of contacting each other at virtually any time. If a dangerous situation occurs, the police are only a phone call away. Cell phones may foster a greater sense of independence and responsibility in the child, as well social benefits.

It is not the cell phone itself, but the way it can be used that may be risky or problematic. Keep in mind that your child’s ability to make good judgments and decisions is not nearly fully developed yet, and there can be very painful mistakes that are made that *seemed like a good idea at the time* . Consider these points:

- The ability to contact **you** at any time also includes the independence to contact anybody and to be contacted without your knowledge and supervision.
- Most cell phones these days also include internet access, gaming, music, and videos, all potentially unsupervised by you. The potential for your child to come in contact with content that is highly inappropriate and psychologically and developmentally dangerous is certainly present.
- The perceived need to be available to friends at any time via the cell phone may create unhealthy social pressure, increase anxiety, and infringe on precious family time.
- There have been countless articles written about the realities of cyberbullying and sexting, all areas of legitimate concern. Once something is out there, it cannot be recalled and has the potential to be spread to more people than you can imagine in the blink of an eye. A minor disagreement between two friends can often blossom into a major drama and hurt feelings involving several others because of texting. Issues in school and with friends that used to be forgotten about by the next morning “in the olden days” are now allowed to stay alive and grow to sometimes monstrous proportions, resulting in devastated relationships.
- There are the risks of someone else child using your child’s phone, with or without her permission. If a mean-spirited or threatening text message comes from your child’s phone, it is hard to prove that someone else wrote it, thus putting her at risk for being blamed for something she did not do.
- Children are at risk of receiving “chain” texts (similar to “chain” letters of the past) which often contain threatening consequences if the chain is broken. Most children are not able to logically view these threats as empty. They either pass on the text to their friends out of fear, or they worry about the threatened consequences. These situations have been brought to my attention many times by students.
- Several articles have now been published about cell phone use and sleep problems. Many tweens and teens take their phone to bed at night and have their sleep interrupted by texts, thus affecting their health, school performance, and relationships.
- Your child’s ability to complete his homework in an effective and efficient way can be significantly impaired if his cell phone is present and on. Constant interruptions to receive and answer text messages can double or triple the amount of time it takes to complete assignments and increase academic difficulties.

As with any new technological device, if you are aware of the dangers, you can set limits and ground rules that will help protect your child if he or she has a cell phone.

- Talk with your child. Discuss your concerns and help her understand some of the situations and choices she may be faced with. Encourage him to come to you whenever a disturbing call or message is received.
- Check with your cell phone carrier about limits you can set for phone and texting use, as well as internet access.
- Set limits on cell phone use and clear consequences for the breaking of rules. The enforcement of these consequences is critical for your child to learn to use the phone safely and responsibly.
- Teach your child when it is not appropriate to be texting or using her cell phone. Model that behavior yourself.
- When you are all home together, shut the cell phone off or take it away. Set specific times that it can be used for social reasons. Keep meal times and family times cell phone free. 24/7 access to friends is clearly an unreasonable amount of social pressure for anyone to handle, especially children.
- Set clear rules about letting others use the phone.
- Take the phone away at night. Remove the temptation to call or text completely.
- Do not allow cell phones to be present during homework time. Even if it is off, the temptation to check to see if there are any new messages can be overwhelming and distracting.
- Check your child's phone frequently. See how often, when, and to whom he is texting or calling. Check her messages for content. Look at the pictures he has taken or received. This is not a privacy issue, it is a parental responsibility. You are helping your child learn to communicate and use the phone responsibly.

As a social worker, teacher, and mother of four children, I worry about the constant social pressure unlimited cell phone use and texting places on our children. Between cell phones and social networking sites (the subject of another parenting article), our children are constantly facing peer situations and pressures to a degree that they may not be developmentally ready to handle and that is not healthy. Before technology, home used to be a refuge from these pressures. We, as parents, need to set clear limits so that home is still a haven where your child can come, "get away from it all" for a little while, and be safe. Family time should not always include, albeit virtually, all of your child's "contacts". It is an important time to strengthen your relationship with your child and build that special and important bond. Believe me, eighteen years go by so much faster than you think, and before you know it, many of those opportunities will be gone.

Cell phone technology is a wonderful thing if used carefully. If your child has a cell phone, setting appropriate limits will allow him or her to reap the benefits of this technology while growing up and learning to communicate responsibly and safely in our modern world.