



Staying Connected

Should I Get My Child a Cell Phone?

Cell phones provide a way for parents and children to reach each other any time, anywhere. Many phones also offer GPS capability, giving parents the additional security of knowing where their child is at all times. While this is reassuring, parents must remember that today's cell phones are much more than phones. They are mini computers, and they open up a world of possibilities for children.

In addition to making calls, cell phones allow children to download and play games, listen to music, and take pictures and videos – all without their parents' knowledge. For many parents the benefits of staying connected outweigh the potential risks of cell phones, and they make the decision to give their child a phone. Ultimately, each parent must decide what works best for them and their child. Here are some things you can do to help make a more informed decision.

When is a child ready for a phone?

For children, cell phones have become more than a means of communication. They are status symbols, and children are asking for them at younger ages. Parents should be careful not to give in to the temptation to buy a cell phone because it's cool or because "everyone has one." Before making a decision, you should ask the following questions:

- Does my child need to reach me and not have access to a phone?
- Am I more comfortable knowing I can reach my child at anytime?
- Is my child responsible enough to use a cell phone properly?
- Can we afford it?

Children younger than 11 or 12 probably don't need a cell phone. Before this age they shouldn't be alone anyway. If they need to reach you, they can use a regular phone or the cell phone of the adult who is supervising them.

Talk to Your Child

Sit down with your child and ask them to tell you why they want a cell phone. Make sure to remain positive, even if you don't believe they should have a phone. Ask open-ended questions. Most importantly, listen to what they say.

Research Phones and Service Plans

For younger children, you might want to consider a cell phone that is designed for younger children. These phones typically don't have internet access and limit who can call and who can be called.

Tweens and teens probably won't be satisfied with a simple phone that has no added features, especially if they can't text. Most cell phone companies offer parental controls for an additional fee. These can include blocking numbers and websites, limiting downloads to a specific dollar amount, and establishing times of day the phone can be used.

Set rules and expectations

Establish rules and discuss responsibilities before you purchase a cell phone. Set limits on the use of the phone, especially at night. Be clear about consequences for violating rules. Explain proper cell phone etiquette, and appropriate places and times to use the phone. Teach your children to only accept calls and text messages from people they know, and to never return a phone call or text to someone they don't know.

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