

INTERNET SAFETY NIGHT



Cell Phone and Smartphone FAQs

At what age should my child have a cell phone or smartphone?

There is no magic age when every child should have a cell phone. That's a decision that depends on the child and the parents, and it's an expensive one. **To help you determine whether your child is ready for a cell phone (and just as important, whether *you're* ready for your child to have a cell phone), ask yourself the following questions:**

- Does my child need a cell phone to reach me? Some parents give their child a cell phone for safety reasons, so they'll always be in touch. That typically happens when the child becomes more independent, say by going out with friends or traveling without the parent to or from school or after-school activities.
- Will my child use the phone responsibly? Your child should be mature enough to take care of the phone, keep it charged, not lose it, and follow the rules you set for using it.
- Why does your child want a phone? Typically around age 11, kids start feeling the social pressure to have a cell phone so they can text one another. Can your child give you a rational argument for wanting a phone—other than "everyone has one"?

What kind of features does my child need in a phone?

Again, this depends on your child's age and maturity level and your own comfort level.

- If the sole purpose of the phone is to keep you and your child in touch, then a basic phone that makes and receives calls will do. Cell phone plans that are prepaid may also help you manage a budget and ensure that time spent on the phone is not wasteful. You can even program the phone to dial and accept calls only from preapproved numbers.
- If your child is in middle school or above, you might want to sign up for a plan that allows unlimited texting. Cell phones have become an important way

for preteens and teenagers to communicate, and they prefer texting over calling. Just remember to set clear rules for when the phone must remain off (for example, during school, at the dinner table, and at bedtime).

- If your child is begging for a smartphone, ask yourself whether you're comfortable giving her full access to a portable device that allows her to create, upload, and view videos, update social networking sites, browse the Web, download apps, and more. Smartphones are powerful devices, so you should be confident that your child will use the technology responsibly.

What rules should I set for cell phone use?

You want your child to use the phone safely and responsibly. Some basic rules are:

- Respect others. That means no sending rude texts, forwarding rude texts, or taking embarrassing photos or videos of others.
- Respect yourself. No sexy texts, photos, or videos. Remind your child that if he doesn't want you, his teacher, his principal, and his grandmother to see it, don't send it!
- Turn the phone off at school, at the dinner table, and at night. If your child is a teenager and drives, no texting or talking while driving! Not only is texting while driving dangerous, it's against the law in many states.
- Have the whole family charge their cell phones at night in a central location, somewhere other than a bedroom where they might be a distraction.

If your child has a smartphone, make sure your child checks with you before downloading apps, even free ones. Then take a good look at the description and ratings. Many apps aren't appropriate for children.

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Remember, you're the parent and you set the rules. If your child breaks them, then be prepared to follow through with a punishment, such as revoking cell phone privileges.

How can I control how my child is using the cell phone?

Cell phones are, by their portable nature, private. It's difficult for a parent to know who their child is talking to or texting with. It's important to let your children know that you trust them, but that you want to make sure they learn to use a cell phone safely and wisely. In cases where you feel their safety is at risk, here are some steps you could take:

- Let your children know that anything they do on their phone could be made public, just as it could on a social networking site. Remind them to think before they text or share.
- Check the call and text history on the phone. You can also review your cell phone records to find out whether your child has used the phone during school hours or when he should be sleeping.
- Another option is to use the parental controls available through your wireless carrier. Check with your carrier for specifics, but typically the controls will let you filter out certain content, restrict the time of day your child can use the phone, set limits on the minutes your child can use, and specify who she can talk with and text.
- You can also buy special security software to load onto your child's phone that alerts you when certain texts or photos are sent to or from your child's phone. For smartphones, there is software that can block access to websites you feel are not appropriate (pornography, violence, gambling, social networks, etc.)
- Consider encouraging your child to use his allowance to pay for part of the cell phone. When children become invested in the technology, it can encourage them to use it more responsibly.