

Parents' Guide to Kids and Cell Phones

Everything You Need to Know Before You Buy Your Kid a Cell Phone.

Caroline Knorr June 11, 2012 **Categories:** [Ask our parenting editor](#), [Cell phone parenting](#)

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These tips can help you:

- Decide whether your kid is ready for a cell phone
- Teach basic cell-phone safety
- Explain responsible cell phone rules
- Set limits

What's the right age to get my kid a cell phone?

Age isn't as important as responsibility and maturity. If your kid can demonstrate both -- by checking in with you at appointed times, following your rules, adhering to school guidelines, and handling the phone sensibly -- then **he or she may be ready**. Here are a few questions to help you decide:

- Do your children need to be in touch for safety reasons?
- Would having easy access to friends benefit them for social reasons?
- 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?

Can I "just say no" to cell phones?

It's not a tragedy to be the only kid at school without a phone. But there are very few public phones anymore. If there's an emergency and you need to reach your kid, you'll be kicking yourself for not having gotten him one. Maybe you just don't

want to buy into a tech-obsessed, always-connected culture. You can still pass along your values by modeling the tech habits you want your kids to pick up -- without missing that emergency call.

What are the basic safety rules for cell phones?

Basic safety skills are essential for kids' safety and privacy. Here are the areas kids will need to be responsible for, plus some best practices.

Texting

- **Be respectful** -- both to the people you're texting with and those around you.
- **Be careful.** Assume that even "private" texts can become public.

Calling

- **Verify the caller or texter.** Don't respond to numbers you don't know.
- **Answer the phone when it's Mom or Dad.** Make sure your kid knows to answer when it's YOU calling!

Cameras

- **Ask permission.** Before you snap someone's picture, take a video, or forward something, ask if it's OK.
- **Don't publicly embarrass people.** Don't post someone's photo -- especially unflattering ones -- from your cell phone without permission.

Apps and downloads

- **Manage costs.** Make sure your kids understand that they're spending real money when they download apps, games, and music.
- **Use filters.** Check your phone for parental controls that let you filter out age-inappropriate content, restrict downloads, and prevent in-app purchases.

Posting

- **Be selective -- not impulsive.** Make sure kids know to be very selective about what they post from their cell phone.
- **Be safe.** Explain why they shouldn't use **location** services.

What should I do if someone "sexts" my kid?

This can happen -- even accidentally! Tell your kid to delete the photo and block the number. And if someone asks your kids to send them a "sext," make sure your kids say no and tells you if they're being pressured.

My kid's friend texted an embarrassing photo of her to friends. What

should I do?

She learned the hard way that kids can use cell phones to humiliate others by forwarding texts, photos, and other things that were thought to be private. First, explain that this is a form of cyberbullying. Next, talk to the other kid's parents -- and show them the evidence. Don't accuse -- but do make sure that you're all on the same page about what's appropriate behavior. Make sure your kids don't retaliate, but do make sure they're standing up for themselves and have supportive friends who will also stand up to bullies. Also consider discussing the matter with your kid's school -- the bully may actually be acting out due to other problems.

Is there anything I can do about the spam my kid's phone gets?

Cell phone spam (unsolicited bulk messages) is a growing problem -- and if kids click on these ads, they may be unwittingly giving away information or opting into a service. Call your cell phone company to report the problem; they may ask you to forward the spam to a specific number. Then, block the caller, either by using your phone's settings or going through your carrier.

Should I buy parental controls from my wireless carrier?

There are pros and cons to purchasing these services, which let you do everything from filtering inappropriate content to blocking phone purchases to locating your kid on a map. The main "con" is cost. Some of these features can be expensive, and you may be able to find cheaper alternatives through the phone's built-in settings or through third-party apps. But on the "pro" side is need. While we like to think our kids will be completely responsible, some kids will resist your rules. If your kid is risking safety, privacy, and money, it might be worth [looking into these services](#).

Are smartphones OK for kids?

Kids love smartphones. And why not? They can play games, access the Internet, video chat -- and do lots of other advanced activities. If you're going to spring for a smartphone, get one that allows you to turn off features you don't want your kids using (like the ability to purchase apps) and keep the ones that you're OK with (like texting).

How do I keep tabs on my kids' cell phone use without seeming intrusive?

Some parents say, "If I'm paying for it, I'm entitled to read my kids' texts, check their call log, and know who their buddies are." That's valid, but kids consider these devices to be as personal as diaries, so **tread cautiously**. Spot checks are a good idea. You know your kid best. If you sense something isn't right, spot check more often. Explain that your rules are for their safety and protection and that you need to be able to make sure they're using their devices appropriately.

My kid seems addicted to her phone. What do I do?

Experts have compared **cell-phone dependency** to gambling. Every text, email, and update is like a "hit" you begin to crave. Hopefully, you're just dealing with a compulsive habit that you can manage by structuring your kids' time. Schedule time for the phone to be on and off, schedule activities where the cell phone can't be used, and look into programs that block the phone from being used. If you suspect the problem is true addiction, talk to your pediatrician.