

Common Sense on Cell Phones

Some facts

- > 2/3 of teens have cell phones.
- > Cell phones are the #1 form of communication for teens.
- > 70% talk daily with friends on a cell phone.
- > 60% send text messages daily.

Is there really that much to talk about?

You hardly see a teenager these days without a cell phone glued to their ear. And even while hanging out together in person, kids are usually talking to others on their cell phones. Admit it, when you were a teen your parents probably thought you talked too much on the phone as well. But is this constant contact too much of a good thing?

What are they?

Cell phones have become a must-have accessory for nearly every child. There are simple phones designed for elementary school kids like Verizon's LG Migo. It lets a child call up to five pre-assigned numbers. Then there's the more expensive Cingular Firefly, which allows 22 calls and only accepts calls from pre-programmed numbers.

But most kids 9 and older won't carry a "kiddie" phone. They want the ones with many ring tone options, cameras, video recorders, MP3 players, and most of all, texting (SMS) ability. With cell phones, kids are in constant contact with the world. And new "smart" phones come with WiFi Internet connectivity, placing the world in your child's pocket.

Why they matter

Kids have portable and private access to the world – without you there to monitor what they're saying or sending, or who they're talking to.

Unfortunately, this access provides a means for abuse, called cyberbullying. Humiliating texts, photos, and videos captured on phones can be sent instantly or posted to Web sites. And it can all happen pretty anonymously.

Texting has also led to big increases in cheating in class as kids noiselessly text answers to each other. Kids also text late into the night because you won't hear them. Another few reasons cell phones matter: They can distract kids from what's going on around them and they can be expensive. Mobile phones, and the monthly plans that support texting and Web access, can cost a small fortune.

Tips for elementary school kids

- › **Do they really need a phone?** Is it for safety reasons? Or because “everyone” has them?
- › **Make sure they understand the rules.** If your kids have phones, make sure you have programmed everyone’s numbers into the phones so that they display the names of who is calling. Tell them not to answer calls from numbers they don’t know. Make rules for time spent talking, what phones are used for, and make sure they know when the phones should be off.

Tips for middle school kids

- › **Make sure you have the right plan for calls or texts.** Phone plans range in minutes and texts allowed. If you have tweens and teens, get unlimited texting or you’ll face huge bills.
- › **Explain cell phone are expensive – 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, turn off the phone at night, and no phones at the dinner table are a few good rules.
- › **Make sure your kids are using phones appropriately.** That means no rude or sexy texts, no embarrassing photos or videos. For younger kids, monitoring their messages sent and received boxes is not a terrible idea (although they will think it is). You also should check the time of calls to make sure they are made within your established boundaries.
- › **Talk about cyberbullying.** Tell your kids to come to you if anything happens. And check their outgoing messages from time to time to make sure their communication is appropriate.
- › **Tell your kids that sexual talk of any kind is not allowed.** Kids often jokingly use sexual language and sexually aggressive speech. Yet on a cell phone, it can be instantly forwarded to anyone out of context 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!

Tips for high school kids

- › **No texting or talking while driving.** Never. That’s how kids get into traffic accidents – the #1 killer of teens.
- › **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.
- › **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 minutes.** By the time they get to high school, the phone is ringing all the time.
- › **Draw boundaries.** No phones at the dinner table. In the car. In a restaurant. Remind them they have only a couple of years left at home to have annoying conversations with you face to face!

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