Your Child’s First Cell Phone

Many parents wonder what age to provide their child with a cell phone. When making this decision, there are several considerations to know if your child is ready and how to help him or her use it safely.

Cell Phone vs Smartphone
Many parents provide their child with a cell phone as an emergency phone, such as a flip phone on a pay-as-you-go plan. It is to be used when your child is worried, scared, lost, or in an emergency. A smartphone provides your child with a phone, communication device, and portable computer. Once your child has one, it is likely that he or she will always want to have one. There is much more that your child can and will do with a smartphone.

Age Guidelines
Currently there are no evidence-based age recommendations for when a child should get a phone. A common rule of thumb is around the ages of 13 to 15 years, because kids are getting ready to go to or are in high school and they may be involved in after-school activities and would benefit from being able to text, call, or look up bus stops or schedules. Teenagers this age typically have experience being online, and they may have learned how to handle online information or interactions that are scary or inappropriate. It is better for kids to learn how to handle these experiences with a teacher or parent available for support compared with having a first experience alone on a phone.

Rules and Expectations for a Cell Phone
It is critical to create rules and expectations about phone use and the ownership and responsibility of the phone. Have your child participate in this process so that she or he is invested in and knowledgeable about the rules and expectations. Rules on how and when the phone can be used can be developed using a Family Media Use plan, which includes identifying times when phone use is allowed and guidelines on communicating with parents about phone use. Ensure that the phone is not in the same room as your child at night to avoid decreased sleep quality and quantity.

It is important to establish who will pay for the phone. Considerations include how payments will change over time and how overcharges for extra time, text messages, or data will be handled. Determine what will happen if the phone is lost or broken and establish who is responsible for the costs of repair; how the discussion of replacement, if needed, will be handled; and what new rules will apply if the phone is replaced.

When considering providing your child with a smartphone, it is important to know whether your child can handle the responsibilities of owning one. Think about the other valuables your child owns and carries with him or her and consider how often these have been lost or needed to be replaced. If your child is struggling with this, it is probably not a good time to get him or her a phone. Another consideration is if your child can help develop rules about phone use and follow them without you present, since the phone will likely be with your child all the time. This means that your child will have access to online material that may be scary or inappropriate. Your child may be approached by strangers or teased or bullied by other kids using the phone. Consider how your child has handled previous situations to determine readiness to handle this. Finally, consider if your child really wants a phone. Just because your child could get a phone does not mean that she or he should. Upgrading your phone, or a well-meaning family member giving a gift, are not good reasons to give your child his or her first phone if she or he is not ready or interested in having one.

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