

# Common Sense on Cell Phones

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## How are cell phones used?

Cell phones are not just used for talking. Cell phones can be used for texting, surfing the Web, checking Facebook, playing games, downloading applications, playing with ring tones, taking pictures, recording video, and more.

## Why cell phones matter

Cell phones are powerful tools for creativity and communication. But kids can also use them in ways that you may not approve of and could get them in trouble, including:

- » Cheating in school;
- » Staying up late at night texting
- » Taking and sending racy pictures of themselves or their friends;
- » Being distracted when kids should be paying attention — for example, when they're driving;
- » Forwarding private texts, photos, and videos to embarrass someone.

Cell phones allow kids to enter a world that is private and mobile. So it can be hard for parents to figure out what their kids are doing. When your children are home, you can pay attention to what is happening. You cannot do this when they are out of the home on their cell phones.

## What's the right age for your child to have a cell phone?

Many kids feel they have to have a cell phone. To figure out the right age for your kids, ask yourself the following questions:

How independent are they? Do your children “need” to be in touch for safety reasons — or social ones? How responsible are they? Can they follow limits you set for minutes talked and applications downloaded?

Can you trust them not to text during class? Can you trust them not to disturb others with conversations, and to use the text, photo, and video functions responsibly? Can you trust them not to embarrass or hurt others?

## What can parents do?

### Tips for parents of elementary school kids

- » **Ask yourself: Do they really need a phone?** Is it for safety reasons, or is it because everyone else has one?
- » **Make sure your kids understand the rules.** Save the phone numbers of approved contacts on the phone so that your kids can see who is calling. Tell them not to answer calls from numbers they don't know. Make rules for how much time they can talk. Talk to them about what phones are used for, and make sure they know when phones should be off.

### Tips for parents of middle school kids:

- » **Make sure you have the right plan for calls or texts.** If you have teenagers, get a plan with no limits on texting or you will pay much more.
- » **Explain that cell phones are expensive.** You have to pay more for extra ring tones, sports updates, Web access, and other extras.
- » **Work out rules for cell phone use with your kids.** For example do not use phones in class, turn off the phone at night, and do not use phones at the dinner table.
- » **Make sure your kids are using phones the right way.** That means no rude or sexy texts, no embarrassing photos or videos. If you have a young teenager or younger kids, you might even want to view the text messages they send and receive. You will also want to check the time of calls to make sure they are made within your time limits.
- » **Talk about cyberbullying.** Kids can be tempted to harass other kids by bombarding them with too many text messages or by sending cruel messages to other kids. Tell your children to come to you if anything like that happens to them. Check the messages they send sometimes just to make sure their communication is okay.
- » **Tell your children that sexual talk of any kind is not allowed.** Kids often use sexual language as a kind of joke. On a cell phone, this can be instantly forwarded to anyone, and kids can get into all kinds of trouble.
- » **Establish real consequences for breaking your rules, like taking away the phone for a week!**

### Tips for parents of high school teens:

- » **Tell them that they can never text or talk while driving.** That's how kids get into traffic accidents, the #1 killer of teens.
- » **Make sure they pick up your calls.** Many teens believe that calls from Mom and Dad are a bother. As long as you are paying the bills, make a rule that they have to answer when you call, except when they're driving.
- » **Have them look over each month's bill.** Let them see exactly how many minutes they are spending on the phone or texting.
- » **Create rules such as no phones at the dinner table, in the car, or in a restaurant.** Remind kids that they may have only a couple of years left at home to talk to you face to face!

