

Kids and Smartphones: Is My Child Ready?

While many adults can remember life before the smartphone, the same cannot be said for our kids and teens. According to Common Sense Media, children are getting cell phones at younger and younger ages. Based on surveys conducted in 2015 and 2021, the proportion of 8, 9 and 10-year-olds with smartphones has nearly doubled. The percentage of 12-year-olds owning a cell phone jumped from 41 percent in 2015 to 71 percent in 2021. Many parents struggle with how to decide when it is the right time to give kids their own cell phone. Parents may feel pressured by their children to provide them with a cell phone at an early age, but question if their child is actually ready for the responsibility. As with any decision, there are both risks and benefits to consider. With home phones becoming a thing of the past, many parents start to think about providing their child with a phone when they get to the age that they are more likely to be home alone. One of the major benefits that parents often cite is the ability to communicate with children in an emergency situation. While the needs of each family are different, experts agree that when it comes to deciding if your child is ready for a cell phone, age isn't as important as a child's maturity level and sense of responsibility. According to the Childmind Institute, parents should consider their child's level of social awareness and their ability to understand what technology means. When we hand kids a smartphone, we are giving them a powerful tool for communication and parents and caregivers need to consider whether their kids are ready to use a phone responsibly and respectfully. There are certain skills and abilities that are necessary for youth to be responsible cell phone users. Below are some questions to consider that can help parents and guardians consider if they are ready for their child to have a cell phone:



- Do you, as a parent/guardian, have enough time and interest to teach your child how to use a cell phone properly?
- Are you willing to set and reinforce limits on the phone?
- Can your child handle the responsibility of having a cell phone? (i.e. can they remember to keep it properly charged and ready to use, can they avoid damaging or losing it, can they keep track of and respect the limits on the phone plan).
- Will your child follow rules for cell phone use at home and at school?
- How well does your child do with limits on screen time?
- Do you talk to your child about online safety and good digital citizenship?
- Does your child understand what harassment and inappropriate content look like?
- Will they use text, photo, and video functions responsibly and not to embarrass or harass others?

When parents are ready to take that step and give their kids access to a cell phone, experts suggest that the best opportunity for success is to set guidelines and limits up front and establish consequences if these guidelines are not followed. A family media plan can help you get started. The American Academy of Pediatrics offers the following tool to help create your own family media plan.

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/fmp/Pages/MediaPlan.aspx>

Below are some additional ideas:

- **Limit the amount of time spent on the phone-** consider no screens for at least one hour before bed, have your child turn their phone in at night so it is out of their bedroom, try “phone free” meals or family times or create a homework zone where phones are put away.
- **Communicate openly with your child about the risks of cell phone usage-** help them understand safe websites, recognize cyberbullying and understand the dangers of sexting and communication with “friends” they have never met in person.
- **Require children provide parents with cell phone, email and social media passwords-** do random checks of text messages and other phone content, educate yourself on the latest apps, consider using parental controls on the phone and apps, be your child’s social media friend to keep tabs on what they are posting.
- **Discourage your child from sharing personal details online-** monitor apps that use location services.
- **Teach your child that text messages are not to be used for important or emotional conversations-** those should still take place face to face.

Having a cell phone comes with a great deal of responsibility. Just as we teach our kids how to ride a bike or drive a car, it is up to parents and caregivers to teach kids how to use cell phones safely and responsibly. One of the best ways parents can do this is by modeling healthy and responsible phone use themselves. Consider your own technology use and work on setting a good example for your child. For more information check out the following resources:

The Family Online Safety Institute <https://www.fosi.org/good-digital-parenting>

Common Sense Media <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/articles/cellphones-and-devices>

American Academy of Pediatrics <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Cell-Phones-Whats-the-Right-Age-to-Start.aspx>

AT&T Screen Ready <https://screenready.att.com/digital-parenting/>

References: American Academy of Pediatrics, American Psychological Association, Childmind Institute, Commonsense Media, The Family Online Safety Institute