**Cell Phones: What's the Right Age to Start?**



Page Content

Article Body

There really is no “right” age to allow our kids to dip a toe into the digital pond, but if we pay attention to the issues, we’ll be able to decide what makes sense for our kids without getting in the way of a process that will occur whether we like it or not.

At the same time, there is no rush. We can keep the pace reasonable and developmentally appropriate and allow our kids to use technologies that make sense without granting them access to technologies that don’t make sense for their age.

**Cell Phones for Safety**

For example, cell phone use seems to be trickling to younger ages. Studies and reports show that middle school is the time that adoption for cell phones and technology really takes off. Before then, kids who have cell phones don’t use them as expected. Why do they have them? Families I know who give their elementary school kids cell phones do so mostly for safety issues.

1. **Medical:** Some children have emergency issues for which every second counts. For these kids, having access to a cell phone matters because landlines are not as easy to find as when we were kids, even in afterschool programs (although the adults supervising those programs usually carry cell phones, or should). Some families whose children have medical issues feel more secure knowing their child can reach them if symptoms start to flare. Assuming these kids are supervised, this may not be needed but does give families peace of mind.
2. **Emergencies:** With [both parents often working out of the home](https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/work-play/Pages/How-do-the-Kids-Fare-When-Both-Parents-Work.aspx), many feel more secure if kids of all ages have a way to reach them and vice versa. This is an issue every family needs to sort out independently, but if elementary schoolkids are supervised after school, a personal cell phone for the child may not be needed.

**The New Normal Kids "Need"**

For better or worse, we do have a [new norm](https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Raising-Children-in-the-World-of-Media-Video.aspx) being established today which studies and reports are confirming. *YouthBeat: The Syndicated Report* by C&R Research reports on the use of digital devices by today’s kids and teens, *YouthBeat* confirms that today’s kids are starting very young, as young as first grade, and gravitate to:

* TV
* DVD
* video
* Computer
* Cameras
* Music
* Cell phones

Use increases with age and parents provide the majority of purchasing power.

Despite views that kids “need” cell phones when they are young, cell phones use among younger kids is markedly lower than tweens and teens—22% of kids reported using cell phones, compared with 60% of tweens and 84% of teens. The percentages of use were not as wide for other digital technologies.

**The Social Role of the Cell Phone**

The reasons for this are likely developmental. Cell phones play a huge social role that doesn’t become interesting in a child’s life until the tween and teen years. Before that, [show watching](https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Where-We-Stand-TV-Viewing-Time.aspx) and gaming are the prominent interests and are reflected in the digital activities the younger kids gravitate toward.

Author

Gwenn Schurgin O’Keeffe, MD, FAAP

Last Updated

6/1/2011

Source

CyberSafe: Protecting and Empowering Kids in the Digital World of Texting, Gaming, and Social Media (Copyright © 2011 American Academy of Pediatrics)