**Is Your Child Ready for a Cell Phone?**

Consider the fine print before you let your child go mobile.

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From the WebMD Archives

No doubt about it: Cell phones are a great way to stay in touch anytime, anywhere. But is your child old enough to have one? It’s a tough call for many parents because it’s not just about age.

You need to know what's involved -- in terms of both the phone and your child's well-being -- and the potential consequences of letting your child have a phone before deciding about adding that second line to your account.-

**Benefits**

You can't beat the convenience. If your child has a cell phone, you can call or text him to find out where he is and what he's doing and inform him of your own plans. It can make you feel safer just knowing where your kids are. And in an emergency, a cell phone can be crucial if your child needs to reach you -- or vice versa.

That's partly why many parents are buying their kids cell phones. Twice as many children have cell phones now as in 2004. Most [teens](https://children.webmd.com/tc/growth-and-development-ages-15-to-18-years-promoting-healthy-growth-and-development) -- 85% of those aged 14 to 17 -- have cell phones. So do 69% of 11-14 year olds and 31% of kids aged 8-10, according to a 2010 survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation.

For your teen, having a phone offers the same kind of security it does for you. -- knowing that you’re just a call or text away. [Teens](https://teens.webmd.com/default.htm) also may see having a phone as part of fitting in with their friends. But there are also some potential downsides to consider.

**Health Considerations**

[**Radiation**](https://www.webmd.com/cancer/what-to-expect-from-radiation-therapy)

Cell phones work by using radio waves. That's radiation (though it's not like what you'd get from an X-ray). Does that affect health -- especially if children start using phones at a very young age when their brains are still developing?

In 2011, an international study showed no link between cell phone use and [brain tumors](https://www.webmd.com/brain/brain-tumors-in-adults) in adolescents and teens. The [researchers pointed out](https://www.webmd.com/cancer/brain-cancer/news/20110727/study-cell-phones-dont-raise-brain-cancer-risk-in-kids), though, that the people in that study didn't use their phones as much as people do today.

Still, experts say longer studies are needed. Joel Moskowitz, director of the Center for Family and Community Health at UC Berkeley's School of Public Health, says, "It will take several decades to get conclusive evidence on this."

It's possible for cell phone users to reduce their exposure by spending less time on the phone or by using a hands-free device or speaker mode when making a call.

[**Sleep**](https://www.webmd.com/sleep-disorders/default.htm) **(or Lack Thereof)**

If your child has her cell phone with her at [bedtime](https://www.webmd.com/parenting/childs-bedtime), will she actually go to [sleep](https://www.webmd.com/sleep-disorders/ss/slideshow-sleep-disorders-overview) or will she stay up and text?

Pediatricians are seeing growing evidence that cell phones, especially those that allow kids to text, can disrupt children's [sleep](https://www.webmd.com/sleep-disorders/sleep-habits-assessment) patterns. In a recent survey, four out of five cell-owning teens sleep with their phone on or by their beds, and teens who text were 42% more likely than those who don't to keep their device close at night in case they got a text.

Sleep is important for growing kids. You can set some ground rules with a phone curfew to ensure your child gets a good night’s rest.

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**Teen Drivers and Texting**

Texting while driving is a huge risk. A Virginia Tech Transportation Institute study shows it’s the most distracting task a driver can do.

Other research has found that talking on the phone -- hands-free or not -- affects driving ability as much as drinking alcohol. And 28% of all traffic accidents are caused by drivers using a phone to text or call, according to the National Safety Council.

Don't assume your teen won't use a phone while driving. In one survey, more than half of teens aged 16-17 who own cell phones said they have talked on the phone while driving, and a third of those teens who text admitted that they have texted while driving.

"Lots of kids think they can multi-task," Lori Evans, MD, director of training in [psychology](https://www.webmd.com/mental-health/guide-to-psychiatry-and-counseling) at the NYU Child Study Center, says. "But multi-tasking isn't really multi-tasking. It's just shifting attention. So kids think they can text and pay attention to the road, but in reality they can't. That's dangerous."

Talk to your teen about the risks. Follow up over time to make sure he or she gets the message.

Above all, set a good example. If they see you texting (or talking) while driving, you've undermined the lesson you want them to learn.

**More Than a Phone**

Cell phones can also put social media, videos, games, movies, music, and TV shows within reach. Are you ready for your child to have that kind of access?

Social interaction can be positive. It's one way kids can learn to relate to other kids. But there is also the potential for "cyber [bullying](https://www.webmd.com/parenting/features/prevent-cyberbullying-and-school-bullying)," which is social harassment via text, instant messaging, or other social media. Many smartphones have a "location sharing" feature, which could raise concerns about people stalking kids as they go from place to place.

There isn't a lot of research yet on how cell phones affect mental and emotional health. But early studies show that frequent texting and emailing can disrupt kids' concentration. It can also become compulsive if kids start being "on call" 24/7 to keep up with their friends.

**When Are They Ready?**

Think beyond your child's age before making the cell phone decision.

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Caroline Knorr, [parenting](https://www.webmd.com/parenting/default.htm) editor with the nonprofit group Common Sense Media, says, "Maturity and the ability to be responsible are more important than a child's numerical age.

She says, "We want our kids to be independent, to be able to walk home from school and play at the [playground](https://www.webmd.com/parenting/tc/playground-safety-topic-overview) without us. We want them to have that old-fashioned, fun experience of being on their own, and cell phones can help with that. But parents have to do their research and talk to their children and make sure they're using the phones safely themselves, too."

As your child becomes more independent (think middle schoolers or high schoolers), they're closer to needing a phone than younger children whom you still take everywhere.

"Look for the developmental signs," Evans says. "Does your child lose his belongings? Is he generally a responsible kid? Can you trust him? Will he understand how to use the phone safely? The rate at which kids mature varies -- it will even be different among siblings."

And think long and hard about whether your child actually *needs* rather than *wants* that phone. "Children really only need phones if they're traveling alone from place to place," Evans says. "Kids in carpools may not need phones, but kids traveling on a subway or walking to school may. It's about who they are as individuals, what's going on in their lives, and how much they can handle, not a certain age or grade."

WebMD Feature Reviewed by [Hansa D. Bhargava, MD](https://www.webmd.com/hansa-bhargava) on 8/, 012

**Sources**

**Monitoring Your Child's Phone**

Should you check who your child is calling and what she's tweeting?

Absolutely, Knorr says. "I know that kids consider mobile devices to be personal property," she says. "And they don't want their parents snooping around. But I think parents are justified in saying, 'I understand this can be used for good but it also can be misused. So every now and then I'm going to check to make sure you're using it responsibly and respectfully.' Then make it an ongoing dialogue: 'Have you gotten weird texts?' 'Any calls that made you uncomfortable?' 'Who are you texting?'"

But you might want to skip the GPS locator services. Neither Knorr nor Evans recommends them unless your child is showing a pattern of getting into trouble.

"Most kids don't need GPS trackers on them," Evans says. "That's really feeding on our [anxiety](https://www.webmd.com/anxiety-panic/default.htm) as parents more than meeting a true safety need."

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"The issue is really about educating children how to use cell phones in appropriate ways," Evans says. "Cell phones can definitely be beneficial, as long as you know your individual child."

**6 Cell Phone Rules for Your Kids**

If you decide your child is ready for a cell phone, set the ground rules first.

* **Buy them a basic phone:** Yes, you can still get a phone that doesn't include a camera, Internet access, games, and texting. If you're passing one of your phones down to your child, turn off all the extra features. And if your child complains, remind her that phones are tools, not toys. "It's about safety, not social status or games," Knorr says.
* **Set limits:** Most cell phone companies allow you to cap the number of texts a user can send or receive as well as the number of minutes the cell phone can be used. If a child goes over the designated plan amount, have her pay the extra charges. (Older teens can be responsible for their entire cell bills.) You also can block Internet access and calls from unapproved numbers on most phones.
* **Set more limits:** Designate times that the cell phone needs to be turned off -- for instance, during family meals, after 10 p.m., and during school hours. If your teen is a driver, insist that he or she not use the phone when driving. Some families don't allow cell phones in children's rooms at night to keep kids from texting or making calls after [bedtime](https://www.webmd.com/parenting/raising-fit-kids/recharge/slideshow-make-bedtime-easier). Insist that your child answer your calls and texts right away, and teach your child not to answer or return calls and texts from people they don't know.
* **Follow the same limits yourself:** Let's face it: You have to walk your talk. If you don't want your child to use the phone during meals or while driving, follow those rules yourself. If you don't want him or her to compulsively check the phone, don't do so yourself. You are your child's No. 1 role model, whether your child admits it or not.
* **Create some distance:** For now, until the radiation risks are clearer, Moskowitz recommends using ear phones instead of holding the phone up to the ear. Also, don't let kids sleep with their phones under their pillows. He also advises against carrying cell phones in front pants pockets, due to a potential radiation risk to the reproductive system.
* **Teach good behavior:** Children aren't born knowing the rules about how to use cell phones respectfully, including not using them to spread rumors, not taking (or sending) photos without people's permission, not sending inappropriate photos or texts, not having personal conversations in public places – and, of course, never communicating with strangers, no matter how they present themselves. It's up to you to teach them.

CTIA, a wireless industry group, has a [sample contract on its web site](http://files.ctia.org/pdf/bsw/example_of_family_rules.pdf) for family rules on cell phone use.

WebMD Feature Reviewed by [Hansa D. Bhargava, MD](https://www.webmd.com/hansa-bhargava) on 8/, 012

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