

Cellphones and Devices: A Guide for Parents and Caregivers

How to help preteens and teens use their phones safely and responsibly.

By age 11, [about half of children](#) in the U.S. own a smartphone. When you hand your child a cellphone, you're giving them a powerful tool for communication and entertainment. These devices become a [constant companion in the lives of preteens and teens](#)—a source of connection, creativity, and, yes, even distraction.

Here are some ways for parents and caregivers to guide their children to use their phones in healthy and responsible ways.

What's the Right Age to Get Kids a Cellphone?

The right age to give a child their first cellphone is [really up to you](#). Age isn't as important as your kid's maturity level, their ability to follow rules at home and school, and their sense of responsibility, as well as your own family's needs.

If you think your kids' tech skills are greater than their ability to use a phone wisely, pay attention to that gap. You may need to say, "No, not yet."

Here are some questions to consider:

- Do your kids show a sense of responsibility, such as letting you know when they leave your home? Do they show up when they say they will?
- Do your kids tend to lose things, such as backpacks or homework folders? If so, expect they might lose a phone, too.
- Do your kids need to be in touch for safety reasons?
Would having easy access to friends benefit them for social reasons?
- Do you think they'll use a cellphone responsibly—for example, not texting during class or disturbing others with their phone conversations?
- How closely will they follow the boundaries you've set for when, where, and how long they can use their phone?
- Will they use text, photo, and video functions responsibly and not to embarrass or harass others?

Adding a family member to your service plan can get expensive. For your kids' first phone, consider these options:

- A smartwatch with limited features, like [Verizon's GizmoWatch](#) or the [TickTalk](#).
- A prepaid phone that doesn't lock you into a long-term contract.
- A "feature" phone with large icons and a limited range of functions, such as the Nokia 225.
- A flip phone, like the Jitterbug Flip, which is designed for seniors but great for kids too because it has large numbers and GPS tracking.
- Low-cost, prepaid carriers, such as Boost, Mint, Twigby, and Tello.

What Are the Basic Safety Rules for Cellphones?

Discuss these rules before you give your kid a cellphone.

Texting

- Be respectful, both to the people you're texting with and those around you.
- Be careful. Assume that even private texts can become public.

Calling

- Verify the caller. Don't respond to numbers you don't know.
- Always answer the phone when it's a parent or caregiver!

Taking pictures and videos

- Ask permission before you snap someone's picture, take a video, or share anything.
- Don't publicly embarrass people. Don't post someone's photo or video—especially an unflattering one—without their permission.

Apps and downloads

- Apps, games, music, and in-app upgrades can cost real money. Follow your family's rules about what you can and can't buy, and whether you need permission to download.
- You may not be able to access everything if parental control settings are enabled. Depending on your family's rules, some content, downloads, and in-app purchases could be blocked.

Posting

- Think before you post. Be very choosy about what you post from your phone.
- Be safe. Sharing private information and using location services can be risky.

What Are the Rules About Using Phones at School?

Every school and teacher has different rules for cellphone use. However, most allow students to bring phones as long as they turn them off during class. Enforcement of these policies is often left to teachers, who are juggling a number of priorities. There can sometimes be a disconnect between what families think the rules are at school and what some classes allow for. To limit distractions during the school day and maximize learning and in-person social connection, consider the following:

- **Look up your school district's acceptable use policy (AUP) for cellphones.** Go over the school's rules for using phones with your child. Even if the school or teachers apply the policy differently, talk with your child about sticking to the general rules and creating a routine they can follow every day.
- **Kids should use their phones infrequently, and only when permitted.** This could be before and after—but not during—the school day, such as when they need a ride, their plans change, there's an emergency, or a parent or caregiver calls. Even if other students are using phones when they're not supposed to, try to resist the temptation.

- **Consider setting restrictions on notifications and time limits on apps so they're not distracted.** This can also give students a chance to better engage in class and with their peers. You can set parental controls for apps on [Apple](#) and [Android](#) devices to limit screen time during school hours.
- Students have been known to misuse their phones at school. **Have a conversation about why you're allowing them to have a phone at school, what is and isn't OK, and set your expectations.** Review what behavior is unacceptable, including cheating, taking pictures or videos of other people without their permission, posting classroom antics, and more. (You may also want to talk with them about how cellphones are occasionally used to capture serious moments of injustice.)
- **And for grown-ups, although it can be tempting to text your kid during the day, resist the urge unless it's truly urgent.** Getting updates about after-school plans or sharing notes can also be distracting for kids.

How Can I Get My Kids to Put Down Their Phones?

Constantly looking at phones—it may be annoying, but it's a normal part of life for many kids. Staying in touch with friends is important to preteens and teens. However, if phone use is getting in the way of family time, homework, and other responsibilities, it might be time to help your kid manage their phone use.

- **Help kids reflect on their phone habits by having open, nonjudgmental conversations.** Then give them a tool like a [Family Tech Planner](#) to suggest changes and set goals for themselves.
- **Help them find space for face-to-face conversations.** Put phones down during key conversation times such as mealtimes, car rides, or on public transportation.
- **Model the manners and behavior you want to see.** Avoid texting in the car. Consider describing your phone use ("I'm looking up directions to the party") so younger kids understand why you're using it. Make sure to excuse yourself if you have to interrupt a family moment to attend to your phone.
- **Charge kids' phones in a common area at night.** Removing their phones can give kids a needed break.
- **Establish consequences for problematic phone use.** If your kids are having trouble putting the phone away when you ask or are having other behavior problems with their phones, consider temporary time or location limits.
- **Understand the underlying reasons your child might be on their phone a lot.** They may have a friend who is distressed and texting them, a game or app that's pinging for their attention, or they may be avoiding what they see as stressful interactions with others at home. Talking about it can help clarify what drives your child's phone use.



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