



CREATING A SAFE ENVIRONMENT

How to know if your child is ready for a cell phone



By Jane Sutter

Like anything related to technology, the question of what is the appropriate age for a child to get a cell phone has no simple answer.

“When it comes to age appropriateness, it’s a really complicated space to navigate, and the reality is there is really no one-size-fits-all when it comes to when to give a child their first cell phone, when they’re mature enough to handle the responsibilities that come with cell phones and tablets,” said Supreet Mann, director of research at Common Sense Media.

The nonprofit Common Sense Media offers entertainment and technology recommendations for families and schools. It also conducts research on the impacts of media and tech use on kids’ physical, emotional,

social and intellectual development.

Mann ticked off a list of questions that parents should ask themselves as they consider allowing their child to have a cell phone:

“Ask yourself if your kids have shown that they are responsible. Do they show up at places when they say they will? Do they keep in touch already and will a phone enhance that or make it an easier process? What are their other social situations that might make a phone necessary? Does the phone enhance their ability to do the things they are already doing, such as getting together with friends?”

The structure of the family is also something to consider, Mann said. Are there safety reasons that a child should have a phone? How does having a phone fit into the family’s larger value system? What are the financial costs of adding a phone to the family?

Media usage among kids

Common Sense Media recently released a report on media usage of kids ages 0 to 8. The study found that 40 percent of 2-year-olds have their own tablet, and more than 50 percent of 4-year-olds do. “So toddlers are very much engaging with these devices in their own ways,” Mann noted.

The report found that by age 8, almost a quarter of kids had their own cell phone, and about 79 percent of those phones were smart phones, meaning these phones have internet access and can stream videos, download apps, etc., Mann said. These results are “highlighting the need for really being thoughtful about cell phones and tablets in the home and children’s access to them and how we are walking kids through that new digital space.”

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It's important for parents to talk to their children about the type of content the kids are seeing, Mann said. Parents should teach their children that the content they are seeing is highly edited and highly filtered. They also should talk to them about what they should do if they see content that makes them uncomfortable or if they experience cyberbullying or see someone else being bullied. "I think we sometimes forget how important it is for us as parents to model good online behavior to our child as well, talking about how you experience 'digital dilemmas' as we call them and how you inhabit that space," Mann noted.

Phones are powerful tools

It's important for parents to explain to their children the capabilities that phones have, Mann said. "You want to make sure (kids) know that this tool that you are giving them is a powerful one, one that they can use to access important information that they might need but also one that can potentially show them really damaging things, that they need to understand what that could look like, how to come to a parent if they are in a crisis or if they are just not sure."

For example, being bullied can have long-term effects on a child, Mann said. Parents need to make sure that they implement safeguards on phones to protect their children from inappropriate content.

One danger is exposure to pornography. Common Sense Media did research a few years ago in which they asked teenagers about their access to pornography, including about "intentional pornography" where a teen sought it out and "accidental pornography" where a friend sent pornography to a teen. "We found there are a ton of kids seeing pornography very regularly who never actually sought out pornography," meaning accidental exposure is very high, Mann said. "The average age of first exposure to online pornography was 12...Cell phones and tablets make it so much easier to share that kind of content. So having those kinds of conversations about responsible use is really important." She acknowledged that the problem is "complicated" because kids can be sent this content from other kids.

Mann said that after that research report came out, an educator told her about an incident where a child in second or third grade was found to be streaming pornography on her Apple watch and showing it to other children on the playground.

Apps and social media

While many apps might list age appropriateness as 16-plus, Mann acknowledged that

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GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS

The American Academy of Pediatrics offers the following guidelines for parents before they allow their child to have a cell phone:

1. Talk with your child about your family's rules and expectations. Some families use a phone agreement/contract to set expectations for when, where and how the phone can be used. It could include that parents will know the password and will occasionally check on texts to look for bullying or other concerns.
2. Remind kids that getting a cell phone does not equate with getting social media. Make decisions about each app separately.
3. Set expectations about phone use in the bedroom, at the dinner table and during homework time.
4. Set privacy content, contact, download and downtime settings and explain to kids why that is important to avoid running into creepy or inappropriate content.
5. Every few weeks, talk to your child about how their phone usage is going. If kids are struggling with the phone getting in the way of sleep or contributing to arguments, spend time problem-solving with the child about what needs to change.

HELPFUL WEBSITES:

AT&T collaboration:

AT&T, American Academy of Pediatrics and Common Sense Media collaborated to create helpful content that includes a quiz for parents to determine if their child is ready for a cell phone; information on how to set parental controls on various devices; plus a video and an online template to create a family media plan. <https://screenready.att.com/digital-parenting/>

COMMON SENSE MEDIA:

For reviews of a variety of media including movies, games and apps, plus research reports and resources for teachers on topics such as digital citizenship, go to <https://www.common sense media.org/>

ALTERNATIVES TO A SMART PHONE:

Do you want your child to be able to keep in touch with family and friends with a device that doesn't include apps and access to the internet? Wait Until 8th is an organization that offers a way for parents to band together and pledge not to allow their children to have cell phones until at least after eighth grade. This article outlines a variety of non-smart phone options that include watches and so-called "dumb" phones: <https://www.waituntil8th.org/devices>.

younger kids who are highly motivated to get access to apps will find a way to do so. She is hopeful that efforts to improve age verification to provide effective safeguards will be successful, but she acknowledged the difficulty in doing that.

As with the answer to the question of what is the appropriate age for a child to get a cell phone, the question of when is a child ready for social media does not provide an easy answer, Mann said. Social media can be used by different kids in different ways. Kids who have a difficult time making friends in person may benefit from using social media. At the same time, some kids can behave badly toward others on social media platforms. Most social media apps recommend age 16-plus, but again, younger kids can find ways to circumvent those safeguards, Mann said. "Having an abstinence only policy may not really be getting at helping children navigate these spaces when they inevitably do find themselves in them." So again, parents discussing social media usage is important.

All of this is time-consuming, Mann said, noting that this is asking a lot of parents who are very busy. But just as parents talk to their kids about relationships and friendships and how to navigate those spaces, talking to them about their online relationships is just as important.

Cell phone bans and smart-phone alternatives

Some states, including New York, have explored implementing bans on cell phone use in schools, and some have enacted bans. "I think that for the majority of kids, cell phone bans during the school day are a good idea," Mann said, because the restriction minimizes distraction, but for some kids it may not be helpful. These are kids who don't have strong friendships in their interpersonal life, but have strong online friendships that they use to support themselves during the school day, Mann said.

There are alternatives to giving a child a smart phone. So-called dumb phones allow kids to connect but don't have internet access. "It's a great idea but we don't often see parents actually using those kinds of technologies," Mann said. She thinks it is often easier for parents to give their child their old smart-phone rather than purchasing an alternative where the parents have to learn a new technology and make sure they are maximizing those safeguards.

Mann doesn't believe that peer pressure is the major factor in kids wanting their own phone, rather it's the kids feeling they are left



out if they don't have a phone. For example, a girl on a basketball team feels left out if she can't participate in the group chat with her teammates if she doesn't have her own phone.

The bottom-line for discussion on a child's readiness for a phone is that there are no easy answers to these questions. "To me the takeaway is there is no magic age, there is no perfect right time," Mann said. The child's needs and the needs of the larger family should be

taken into account. "There is some grace built into that kind of outlook, that it allows for so much more flexibility, and understanding, and parents not sort of beating themselves up about when and how they are making these decisions but also just being mindful it's not a perfect space." Finally, parents need to be aware that sometimes, things won't go exactly the way the parents intend.

Jane Sutter is a freelance writer based in Rochester.

CONTROLLING NOTIFICATIONS ON A PHONE:

The following information is from the Common Sense Media report titled: "Constant Companion: A Week in the Life of a Young Person's Smartphone Use." You can access the entire report here: <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/research/constant-companion-a-week-in-the-life-of-a-young-persons-smartphone-use>

Notifications are plentiful, sometimes fun, sometimes annoying, and they are one of the main things young people can control in their smartphones. Notifications from marketers were the least essential and most irritating to the adolescents whom researchers talked to, who were also wary of platforms trying to get their attention in inauthentic ways (e.g., by telling them when a distant acquaintance had posted but didn't tag them).

One of the main things caregivers and teachers can do is help young people reflect on how smartphone notifications affect their emotions, concentration, and habits of checking their device—and then empower young users to manage their notifications and set "do not disturb" times that align with their needs.

What adults can say and do:

- Try looking at settings for screen time and digital wellness on your phone, and on your child's phone, to talk about which apps send you the most notifications.

- Then discuss how to intentionally update the settings (both within apps and in phone notification settings) to cut out all of the extra disruptions that young people mention as their biggest annoyance.

- Although it takes time to do it, stopping to reflect on how your phone tries to get your attention can lead to great discussions in families and classrooms, and it can give users a feeling of control over how much they use their smartphone. This blog contains tips and helpful instructions: <https://www.waituntil8th.org/blog/2021/9/19/how-to-help-your-kid-use-their-iphone-less>



5 FIVE WAYS

to protect your children from sexual abuse

Parents play the primary role in educating their children about sexual abuse. Here are 5 tips for teaching safety to the little ones God has entrusted to you.

1

Keep it practical. Teach your children the differences between safe touches and unsafe touches.

2

Tell your children that saying “no” is okay. Empower your children to say “no” if anyone makes them feel uncomfortable or touches them inappropriately.

3

Give your children a way to alert you. Tell your children they can use an excuse or share a special “code-word” with you to alert you about an unsafe person or situation.

4

Tell your children to report an unsafe touch.

Let your children know they should tell you if they feel uncomfortable or unsafe around any adult or peer. You can also identify other adults they can tell about unsafe touches.

5

Tell your children you trust them. If your child makes a report to you, believe him or her. Tell them it is not their fault and that you love them. Immediately bring the allegation to the attention of public authorities.



Promise to Protect

Pledge to Heal



ROMAN CATHOLIC
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Creating a Safe Environment Newsletter

is published quarterly by the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester with the aim of helping all of us keep children and vulnerable adults safe at home, at church and in all places in our community.

Comments can be directed to:
Tammy Sylvester,
Diocesan Coordinator
of Safe Environment Education
and Compliance,
585-328-3228,
or Tammy.Sylvester@dor.org.

Victims of sexual abuse by any employee of the Church should always report to the civil authorities.

To report a case of possible sexual abuse and to receive help and guidance from the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester, contact the diocesan Victims' Assistance Coordinator:

Deborah Housel
(585) 328-3228, ext. 1555;
toll-free 1-800-388-7177,
ext. 1555
victimsassistance@dor.org.

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ADDITIONAL SAFETY RESOURCES

ONLINE SAFETY RESOURCES

CHILDREN & TEENS' SAFETY SITES:

Webonauts Internet Academy:

<http://pbskids.org/webonauts/>
PBS Kids game that helps younger children understand the basics of Internet behavior and safety.

NSTeens:

<http://www.nsteens.org/>
A program of the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children that has interactive games and videos on a variety of Internet safety topics.

FOR PARENTS:

Common Sense Media

<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/parent-concerns>
A comprehensive and frequently updated site that is packed with resources. Dedicated to improving the lives of kids and families by providing information and education

Family Online Safety Institute:

<http://www.fosi.org/>

iKeepSafe:

<http://www.ikeepsafe.org/>
Resources for parents, educators, kids and parishes on navigating mobile and social media technologies

Faith and Safety:

<http://www.faithandsafety.org>
Safety in a digital world, a joint project of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops and Greek Orthodox Church in America

LOCAL RESOURCES AND CONTACT INFORMATION

Bivona Child Advocacy Center
(Monroe, Wayne counties):
www.BivonaCAC.org
585-935-7800

Chemung County Child Advocacy Center:
607-737-8449
www.chemungcounty.com

Child Advocacy Center of Cayuga County:
315-253-9795
www.cacofcayugacounty.org

Finger Lakes Child Advocacy Program
(Ontario County):
www.cacfingerlakes.org
315-548-3232

Darkness to Light organization:
www.d2l.org

STEBEN COUNTY: Southern Tier Children's Advocacy Center:
www.sthcs.org
716-372-8532

NYS State Central Registry
(Child Abuse Reporting Hotline):
1-800-342-3720

NYS Child Advocacy Resource and Consultation Center (CARCC)
866-313-3013

Tompkins County Advocacy Center:
www.theadvocacycenter.org
607-277-3203

Wyoming County Sexual Abuse Response Team:
585-786-8846

Yates County Child Abuse Review Team:
315-531-3417, Ext. 6