



# A Parents' Guide to **Mobile Phones**

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It seems just about everybody has a mobile phone now, including more than three-quarters of U.S. teens and a rapidly growing number of younger kids. For young people as well as adults, the technology has changed the way we work, play, communicate, learn, and socialize. Even the term “smartphone” is a bit of an understatement, with all that its hundreds of thousands of applications allow us to do—track flights, do homework, stay fit, take tutorials, avoid traffic, find recipes, read books, or share moments and play games together across vast distances.

Mobile phones also help keep us and our kids safe. They enable us to call for help in an emergency, find our way when we’re lost and help family members keep track of each other. Phones can even be used to help parents know the speed at which a teen is driving the family car. You don’t need us to tell you that they’ve become an indispensable part of our lives.

While the overwhelming majority of young people are using their phones responsibly, it’s natural for parents to worry about how their kids are using such powerful devices. As with any other powerful tool, there are risks, but through responsible use, they can be minimized. That’s why we created this guide.

## Today’s mobile ecosystem means shared responsibility

The mobile ecosystem now has many moving parts, each of which has a role to play in cellphones users' safety, privacy and security. In addition to the service providers themselves, there are the companies that make the devices and operating systems (like Android, iOS and Windows) and the makers of the hundreds of thousands of apps people can download to their phones. Even the makers of smartphones' Web browsers play a role, because they make it possible to access millions of websites, send and receive messages and have voice or chat conversations from any Wi-Fi hotspot—even where there's no cellular service.

There are two other very important players in this ecosystem where families are concerned: *you* and *your children*. More than ever, it’s up to the user to determine what to do with a smartphone and how to use it safely. Safety, privacy and security are now very much a shared responsibility in families, among friends and between users and all the other parts of the mobile ecosystem.

## How kids use mobile phones

The best way to find out how your kids are using their phones is to ask them. Activities popular with kids include photo and video sharing, texting, gaming, and a growing number of social networking apps that are not limited to the ones you might have heard of, such as Facebook and Twitter. It's all about sharing and socializing because, as kids get into their pre-teens, their interests are more and more social. The good news is, if they have cellphones at that age, their use is embedded in everyday life—mostly school life—and the people they're interacting with are typically friends and peers they know from school and other parts of their lives you know about. And sometimes they even use their phones to help with homework. So even though apps come and go and technology changes, the parenting part hasn't changed much. You still need to be the parent, ask questions, and set limits. Just know that what goes on with phones is more about people and relationships than about technology. As for the technology part, our kids are usually pretty happy to help us out with that.



## Is your child ready for a cellphone?

### Consider whether he or she is...

- Able to understand the cost of providing and using a phone and willing to stay within the usage limits you set.
- Ready to take good care of a phone (i.e., isn't likely to lose or break it).
- Able to manage his or her time and not use the phone for socializing or entertainment when there is schoolwork to be done.
- Willing to answer when you call and call you when it's time to check in.
- Willing to talk with you about the apps on his or her phone and how they're being used.
- Able to use the phone politely, in a way that respects the feelings of the people in the room or at the other end of the conversation.
- Willing to only share his or her location with close real-life friends and family.
- Ready to accept the consequences of breaking any family cellphone rules.

## Your child's first phone

There are lots of things to think about when parents consider buying kids their first cellphones. Of course the "right time" and the right phone vary by child, his or her maturity level and the family budget. Some parents want their young children to have a phone so they can call or be reached at any time. Others prefer to wait till they're teens. Factors to consider include: whether a child can use a phone with respect for the device, your rules and the people they interact with on it; if he or she can stay within the usage allowances included in the service plan and whether the child knows when to turn the phone off (e.g., at bedtime).

For young kids, you could consider getting a simple "feature phone" rather than a smartphone. Though they can be used for texting, these basic phones are mainly for just talking—kids can't use them to download third-party apps, some don't have cameras, and they're less expensive if you need to replace them. It's likely that your kids—especially teens and preteens—will want a smartphone and access to apps and, depending on your cellphone plan, you may be able to get them one and add it to your family plan at a fairly low cost. But do consider establishing rules about what apps are appropriate, using parental-control tools and discussing how to keep usage within the family's cellphone plan.



## 12 Tips for Smart Smartphone Use

**Share with care.** Use the same good sense about what you say or share with your phone as you would in person. Once shared, texts, photos, and videos are tough to take back. They can be copied and pasted elsewhere and are out there pretty much forever (possibly even in apps that supposedly make them disappear). Think about all the people in them (including you!). Reputations are at stake.

**Know what your apps know.** Pay attention to any permissions apps request as you install them. If an app asks to access your location, contact list, calendar or messages or to post to your social networking services, consider if the app really needs that information to function. When in doubt, consider withholding permission or not using that app.

**Share location mindfully.** A growing number of apps let you share your location and track where friends are. If you use a location feature, think about who could see that and whether you want them to know where you are. Make sure only close friends or family members can see your location.

**Phones are personal.** Letting other people use your phone when you're not around is like letting them have the password to any of your social network accounts. They can impersonate you, which gives them the power to mess with your reputation and relationships. Lock your phone when you're not using it, and use strong and unique passwords for all your apps.

**Keep it kind.** Because people socialize on smartphones as much as anywhere now, cyberbullying can be mobile too. Treat people well on phones as you would face-to-face and your chances of getting bullied or harassed go down. Respect is contagious. Ask permission before taking photos and videos of others and be aware of people randomly taking pictures at parties, in locker rooms, etc.—you may not want to be tagged in their social-network photo albums!

**The value of "presence."** If you do a lot of texting, consider the impact that being "elsewhere" might be having on the people around you. Your presence during meals, at parties, in the car, etc. is not only polite—it's a sign of respect and appreciated by the people you're with.

**Down time is good.** Constant texting and talking can affect sleep, concentration, school, and other things that deserve your thought and focus. You need your sleep, and real friends understand there are times you just need to turn off the phone.

**Avoid accidents.** Never send or read texts while driving, bike riding and other activities that require your full attention. Make it a rule for the entire family, including parents.

**Have a conversation** (not a lecture) with your kids about smartphone use. Consider drawing up a family cellphone contract and talk with your children about why each point is important (there's a sample contract at [ConnectSafely.org/mobile](http://ConnectSafely.org/mobile)).

**Technology can help.** Visit [GrowingWireless.com](http://GrowingWireless.com) to find out what parental controls your mobile phone company offers, or look for third-party parental-control apps in the app store on your phone.

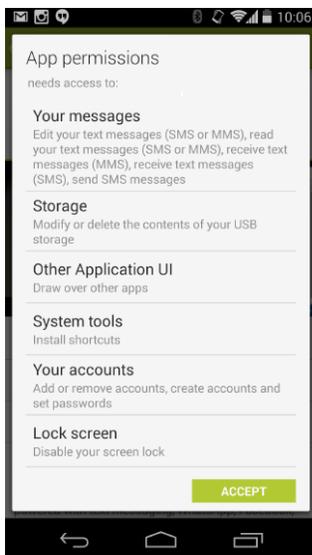
**Find missing phones.** Use a find-my-phone app that can help locate the phone and delete all personal data if it's lost or stolen.

**Watch costs.** Knowing how to keep track of the costs of using a phone and its apps is part of using it responsibly. Be aware of the costs of in-app purchases and the allowances included in your service plan and how to track your data use so you can avoid unexpected charges. Be aware of options that help you use the phone economically, such as using Wi-Fi rather than cellphone service where available.

## Helping kids protect their safety, privacy and security

Young people tend to use their devices safely most of the time, but it's always good to talk over the key issues, even revisit them now and then as your kids change and grow:

- **Communicate with care.** Whether it's by voice, text, a social networking or photo-sharing app, there are plenty of ways kids can interact with people they know and—in some cases—don't know. If a child is being contacted by someone who might be harassing or bullying them, there are usually ways to block that person, through your cellphone company, the app or both. They probably do, but be sure your kids know who is and isn't appropriate to interact with on their phones as well as online. Younger children may need contact lists you set up with people you pre-approve.
- **Limit who can locate you.** All modern phones are equipped with geolocation technology that can pinpoint the phone's location. That can enhance safety and convenience by allowing parents to track kids, users to find lost phones and first responders to find people in an emergency (with Enhanced 911, or "E911"). There are also apps that use location or share it with other users or companies.



With the exception of E911, it's possible to turn off geolocation, either for the entire phone or just for specific apps. You and your kids can review the apps on their phones to see which apps share location. If you're uncomfortable with any of them, you can try to turn off the app's location feature or just delete the app.



- **Lock your phone.** One of the simplest ways to protect privacy and security is to password-protect a phone with a numeric code, gesture, password, or fingerprint so no one else can use it. In addition to protecting the information on your phone, the password also protects you. Locking a phone prevents others from using kids' phones to impersonate them, possibly to bully

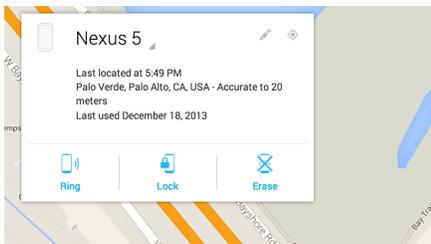
or play "jokes" on others in their name, or to post images or comments that could embarrass them. Tell them never to share that password with anyone—even friends—because sometimes friends make mistakes or become ex-friends.

- **Be app-savvy.** When you're downloading apps, look at the reviews and pay special attention to the permissions they seek. Do a bit of Web searching to see if an app you're installing is from a reputable developer, and only download apps from official sources like Google Play or the Apple App Store. Even then, be careful because not all apps in these stores are appropriate for all users. As you install an app, it may ask you whether it can do such things as access your calendar, contact list, or location—or whether it can post on your behalf to a social networking service. In many cases, you can choose not to, but with some apps, your only choice is to agree to all the permissions or cancel the installation. Either way, you have a choice. You and your children can periodically review the apps on their phones together and consider deleting any that you're not comfortable with. There are also parental controls (see below) that can help you manage your child's use of apps.
- **Share thoughtfully.** Whether they're using photo- and video-sharing apps or commenting in social media apps, kids need to know that what they post is a reflection on them. Talk with them about respecting their own and others' dignity and privacy by being aware of



what they're "saying" with both words and images. We all need to ask permission before sharing pictures of others and think about how they affect our own and others' reputations.

- **Use strong passwords everywhere.** Even if your phone is locked, make sure you have strong passwords for apps or sites that access any personal information, because people can access these services from other devices too. Use strong passwords that are easy to remember and hard to guess (i.e., use symbols, mix upper- and lower-case letters), and don't use the same password for every app, service, or website. You'll find suggestions at [Passwords.ConnectSafely.org](https://www.connectsafely.org/passwords).
- **Consider the costs.** Sign up for a plan that's appropriate for your children's voice, data and texting needs, and check in periodically to make sure they stay within their plan's allowances. It's a good discipline that can offer early financial literacy lessons. Also consider whether a contract plan or pre-paid plan is right for your child. If your plan has a data limit, consider using Wi-Fi when possible. KnowMyApp.org has more advice and offers data usage estimates for popular apps. Have a family policy about spending money on apps and in-app purchases. Even "free" apps can cost money if they allow your child to make purchases within a game or other kind of app. Some families have a rule that kids can't download an app without a parent's permission.
- **Protect the device** with a good, strong case and consider getting some type of insurance through your cellphone company or a third party, in case the phone is lost, stolen or damaged.

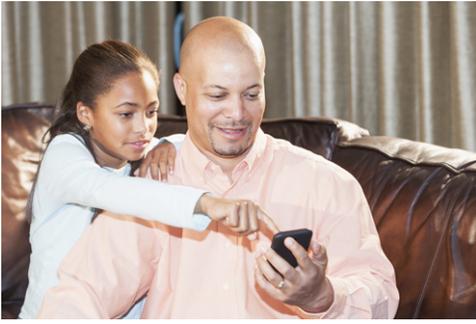


**Use a phone finder app.** There are free apps that can help you locate a lost phone, make it ring even if it's in silent mode, erase the contents and lock it so that an unauthorized person can't use it. Some include additional security features. Go to [ConnectSafely.org/mobile](https://www.connectsafely.org/mobile) for instructions on how to use Apple's Find My iPhone app and Google's Android Device Manager that come with recent models of these phones.

## Parental controls

There are actually two major types of parental controls. The first is *family rules* or guidelines that you establish with your children, and the second is *technology tools* provided by cellphone companies, smartphone makers, and app developers. In many ways, the first kind is more effective, because it involves teaching your children self-regulation and -protection, which are with them wherever they go and can last a lifetime. Monitoring and Web filtering apps are available, but don't let them give you a false sense of security because they're no substitute for the resilience, moral compass and cognitive filter kids develop for their own well-being. If you do use technology to monitor or limit their phone activities, in most cases it's a good idea to be up front with your kids about it and revisit it every now and then as they mature.

Because phones have Web browsers, they can be used to view any type of Web content, including content you might consider inappropriate for your children. Establishing rules and talking with your kids about appropriate use is baseline safety. Depending on the device, if you make yourself the administrator of your child's phone and put the settings behind a password, you can block Web browsing and other functions altogether and decide if they can download apps, among other options. This may be a big factor in deciding what phone you give your child.



Using filtering or time-management apps can be really helpful with some kids. There are also parental-control tools that enable parents to know what kids are texting, what sites they're visiting and what apps they're using, as well as tools that enable you to locate your child when he or she isn't home.

To find parental-control tools, contact your mobile phone company to see what it offers, or visit [GrowingWireless.com](http://GrowingWireless.com) for a list of wireless parental-control tools. You can also

search for "parental controls," "monitoring" or "filtering" in the app store on your child's phone. Look for apps' ratings or users' reviews to see if they're worth downloading (even if they're free); see if they have privacy policies or if their descriptions say anything about how the app will use your data. You'll find links to app stores and other resources at [ConnectSafely.org/mobile](http://ConnectSafely.org/mobile).

## Two kinds of safety

The best way to stay safe when using a cellphone is to use good sense and stay alert. The only real risk to physical safety is distraction. Don't just tell your teens not to text while driving, model it! Texting while driving is extremely dangerous.

Thoughtful, balanced use of phones is good for us in lots of ways: It can help kids get enough sleep (when phones are off), keep grades up and allow time for exercise—and we all know that ignoring your phone occasionally can be good for relationships.

Another form of safety is the social kind. As every child and parent knows, social media can turn into anti-social media, so family conversations about keeping social lives positive need to include the interaction that happens on digital devices too. As a society we're all learning that anonymity and a lack of visual cues doesn't mean we can treat others differently or stop being respectful. It doesn't mean that these aren't fellow human beings behind our texts, posts, photos, avatars, and comments. The same social practices that maintain good relations in offline life support everybody's well-being in digital spaces too. If you want additional help, check out our guide for dealing with cyberbullying at [ConnectSafely.org/guides](http://ConnectSafely.org/guides).



## Some closing thoughts

These days, parenting needs to be as dynamic and adaptive as our kids and their favorite technologies are. What works to help one child might flop when tried with another kid. And what helps a boy when he's 11 can hold him back when he's 14. Just as childhood represents a process of ongoing growth, parenting is a process of ongoing calibration.



In the advice above, we mentioned a lot of external protections—from parental-control tools to phone settings to family rules. What isn't considered enough is the internal kind of safeguards parents have always helped kids develop: self-respect, resilience, empathy, manners, and a moral compass—that inner guidance system that protects them long after they grow up and leave home. They work really well with any technology our kids use, and—though they can be challenging to model and teach—they're not new, and rapid change in kids and technology only increases their value.

## Parents' Top 5 Questions About Mobile Phones

### **1. What's the best age to get a child his or her first cellphone?**

The short answer is, “it depends.” Only you can know if your child is mature enough to follow family rules, take care of the phone and not lose it. Another major factor is whether the child understands how to use the phone in a way that considers the feelings and rights of others.

The average age of kids getting their first mobile phones keeps going down. It was 16 a decade ago; in 2009 it was about 12, according to the latest available data from Pew Research Center. More recent (2013) Pew Research found that 68% of 12-13 year-olds own a cellphone and 23% a smartphone, while 83% of older teens (14-17) have cellphones and 44% have smartphones.

### **2. How can I limit or monitor what my kids do with their cellphones?**

In addition to family rules and lots of communication, there are parental-control tools you can use to block access to websites and apps; monitor what kids are doing (including texting) and control who can call them. You can check with your cellphone company and search for third-party parental-control tools in app stores to find what’s available. If you do use a parental-control tool, we recommend you tell your child why you’re using it. Also seriously consider how much information is too much. Some monitoring apps record a user's every keystroke—even in text messages. Think about whether you really need to know the content of every text.

### **3. How can I make sure my child's privacy is protected?**

There are two types of privacy protection—the kind that can be set or installed on a phone and the kind that develops in a child's head. Privacy settings in apps and on phones can provide control over use of your child's data, and parental controls can give you more control or oversight over his or her phone activities. Locking a phone reduces the risk of it being used by someone to impersonate the phone's owner or bully others.

The second kind—learning how to protect your and your friends' privacy—is just as important because the information users post and share with their smartphones has just as much impact on privacy as settings and other tech safeguards. Helping our kids share information carefully, showing respect for themselves and others, spells real protection of both privacy and well-being. It helps to be up front with your kids about the measures you take and learn *together* what rules and tools best keep their mobile phone use positive and constructive.

### **4. How can I make sure my child only uses apps that are safe and appropriate?**

The best way to ensure that your kids are using safe and appropriate apps is to talk with them about each app they use or want to use and do a little research to make sure it’s appropriate. You can look at reviews in the mobile app stores, search the Web for information about an app or talk with friends who have used it. You could also have a rule that no app gets downloaded without a parent's permission or use parental controls to put app-downloading behind a password so that your child can only download one with your help. But even some appropriate apps can be misused, so kids still need to make sure that what they share doesn’t jeopardize their privacy and security.

### **5. How do I control the cost of my child's cellphone service and apps?**

First, review your cellphone plan to make sure it’s appropriate for your child’s use. Factors to consider are limited or unlimited texting, the number of voice minutes and how much data can be used each month. Consider calling Customer Service at your service provider to make sure you

have the right plan for your family. Also talk with your kids about Wi-Fi, which enables them to use their mobile devices to watch video or download apps or content without incurring the cost of cellular data use. People can also run up costs buying and using apps, so consider having a family policy that addresses spending money for or within apps or setting a password (your kids don't know) that keeps them from buying apps or spending money via "in-app purchases" that can sometimes really add up. Setting limits on your child's use can help keep costs under control.

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