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Don't buy your preteen a cell phone until you do these six things

I don't think preteens should have their own cell phones, but many parents disagree. Forty percent of 8 to 12 year olds have their own cell phones, with that number expected to increase to about 65 percent over the next three years.

If you insist on indulging your child with this luxury, please consider these six things.

1. **Have your child pay part of the cost.** At a time of economic turmoil, how can you justify this added expense? Isn't this just another example of parents buying stuff they don't need with money they don't have? Insist that your child complete regular chores to pay for the phone and be strong enough to terminate phone privileges if your child doesn't comply with this expectation.
2. **Monitor text messages.** Young children have no understanding of the risks of the electronic world and it's your job to protect them. Inform your child that you will be regularly reviewing their text messages. (Please don't write to me about the privacy rights of a 10-year-old!) Their safety and security takes priority over their privacy.
3. **Place limits on phone and text messaging.** A pleasant diversion can easily transform into an annoying habit and even an addiction for some people. Kids can easily become preoccupied with this mindless diversion from real life. Limit the number of minutes and text messages that can be used monthly.

4. **Discuss respect and etiquette.** Talk about cyber-bullying and gossiping with your kids. My concern with texting is that it is just too easy to immediately communicate any fleeting thought or feeling. Kids need to be careful about gossiping or expressing a transitory feeling about a friend, teacher or coach. That text can then be resent or used in ways for which it was never intended.

5. **Have an explicit discussion of ‘sexting’ with your child.** Phones and cameras are a dangerous combination for many preteens. Twenty percent of teenagers admitted to electronically sending or posting nude or semi-nude pictures of themselves. Fifteen-year-old Marissa Miller from Pennsylvania recently got in legal trouble for sending what she felt were harmless pictures she took when she was at a sleepover when she was 12 years old. Talk with your child about these situations.

When I discussed this recommendation at a parents’ workshop a few weeks ago, a mom responded that she felt her 9-year-old was too young to learn about sexting. If you feel that your children are too young to learn about sending and receiving sexually explicit pictures, then they are too young for a cell phone!

6. **Establish privacy and safety rules.** Kids should never give out their cell phone number or accept text messages from strangers. Lots of kids in my office are telling me about their “friends” from across the country, people they are meeting on the internet and text messaging throughout the day. Most parents are unaware of their kids’ dumb and dangerous practice of sharing intimate feelings and personal information with total strangers.

We need to prepare our children for this new electronic world, but that doesn’t mean putting them in situations they cannot handle. Delay the cell phone until your child is a teen.

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