



# Your Child's First Phone: Are They Ready?

By: Jenny Radesky, MD, FAAP

Deciding when to give your child their first phone can be a source of anxiety. Smartphones, in particular, offer a portal to the internet, apps and social media. You may not feel your child is ready for that much access to the digital world. Yet, you may want to get your child a phone for the basics: having a way to contact you when they're traveling between school, after-school activities or different households.



## More connected, but more distracted?

During the COVID-19 pandemic, many families have seen the positives of letting their children use internet-connected devices. For many kids, it has meant being able to talk and play with friends virtually during school closings and isolation at home. But the pandemic also showcased the downsides of more time online. Many children have stumbled upon age-inappropriate videos, for example, or had creepy encounters with people online. Others are unable to put the device down when it's time to do something else.

## How are cell phones different than other devices?

All of this raises the question: Lots of kids have access to tablets and computers, so how are phones different? Well, a big reason is that mobile phones are just that—mobile. Children can carry them everywhere. Phones are more likely to be right next to your child—on their bedside table, at the dinner table, on car rides or other many spaces other devices don't typically go. Because of this, they may interrupt or push out other important activities. These may include face-to-face conversation, homework, sports practice or sleep, to name a few.

## Here are some things to ask and consider as you and your child discuss getting a first phone:

1. **Has your child thought through how they would want to use the phone?** It's natural for kids and teens to want a phone because "everyone else has one." However, they may not be ready for problems that can come with having a phone. Some teens have actually said they regret getting a smartphone early. These kids didn't realize they would have so many new distractions or social drama in their lives.

Talk with your child about other options—like getting a flip phone or watch that allows communication without all the digital baggage. Options like these may be a better fit at younger ages.

2. **What are your child's unique strengths and challenges that might make having a phone more difficult?** Does your child have a strong sense of responsibility and impulse control, or do they tend to act before thinking? Do they need your help with making good decisions, or do you trust their judgment when they are unsupervised? This becomes important to consider once they have access to the internet, texting and social media apps and can easily say or post things they may regret.
3. **How would you know your child is being a responsible phone user?** Talk with your child about online safety and good digital citizenship. Decide on some benchmarks that would show that they are being safe and kind while using their new technology. (For example, did they get in any online arguments this week? Did they check their phone during class?) You may be able to get some idea about this based on your child's experience during virtual learning to help guide your conversation. (Did your child get really distracted with video games or websites during Zoom classes? Could they resist that temptation?)

- 4. What are the other ways they can connect with friends?** Social connection is the biggest driver for having a phone in the tween and teen years. Interacting with friends is crucial as your child develops a sense of self and community. However, if you don't think your child is ready for a smartphone, there are other ways to help them connect with friends.

In addition to making sure they have in-person social opportunities like clubs or sports, you could enable video chat and text messaging on an iPad or tablet, for example. Or, you could allow video gaming with friends on a shared server or safe multiplayer game with an "invitation only" privacy setting.

- 5. Do you have a regular way to check in with them about how life is going (including their digital life)?** When kids get a smartphone, they have easier access to the world of information on the internet, apps, and social media. Because the digital world isn't always designed with young users in mind, though, your child or teen needs you to act as a mentor. In this role, you can help them have positive experiences online and unpack the negative experiences.

If you don't have a regular time when you can talk with your child, like during car rides or meal times, try making a new routine. You might set aside a night each week when you cook a meal together, for example, or block out time for a shared workout.

It's also important to keep informed about what's going on with digital media. Have your child show you what games (</English/family-life/Media/Pages/Video-Games-Set-Your-Own-Ratings-System.aspx>) or apps they like, or read up (<https://www.common sense media.org/app-reviews>) on them when you have a minute.

You can also check out our **PhoneReady Questionnaire** (<https://screenready.att.com/digital-parenting/>) to help decide whether your child is ready for the responsibilities of a cell phone. The 10-question tool, developed by AT&T in collaboration with the American Academy of Pediatrics, helps you gauge your child's behaviors, developmental maturity, and your family's values to calculate one of three recommendations: ready, almost ready or not yet ready. Based on the results, you'll get recommended next steps and resources to help you activate parental control settings, create a **Family Media Plan** (</English/fmp/Pages/MediaPlan.aspx>) and access tips to help your child have a safe and positive experience.

## Continue the conversation

If you and your child decide that they are not ready for a phone, that's OK too. This can be an ongoing conversation about your child's relationship with technology. You can continue to explore what kind of non-smartphone tech products are available that meet their social needs, as well, along with other considerations.

If you do decide to get a phone for your child, make the effort to know what kinds of features there are to support safe and positive media use. These may include parental controls, settings, filters, timers and other digital wellness tools are available on devices and apps. Set these up together with your child, and explain the reasons behind the limits and controls you choose for your child's cell phone.

Treat getting a phone like an experiment. As your child shows more responsibility, they could gain more independence and fewer controls. Keep a mentorship mindset: Check out new apps or platforms together, compare notes, and decide together what is working and what's not.

Finally, create a family media use plan and model health phone habits. Remember that kids learn as much from watching us as they do from our well-intended lectures! If you look at your phone while driving or during meals, they are likely to do the same. If you can try to balance your media use with screen-free activities, they will find it easier to do the same.

## More information

- Cyberbullying: What Parents Need to Know (</English/family-life/Media/Pages/Cyberbullying.aspx>)
- 5 Unhealthy Ways Digital Ads May Be Targeting Your Child (</English/family-life/Media/Pages/5-Unhealthy-Ways-Digital-Ads-May-Be-Targeting-Your-Child.aspx>)
- Family Media Plan (</English/fmp/Pages/MediaPlan.aspx>)
- PhoneReady Questionnaire (<https://screenready.att.com/digital-parenting/>)

## About Dr. Radesky

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