

4 STEP PARENT GUIDE TO YOUR CHILD'S PHONE



by Matt Higgins, Director of Operations, Hope Children's Home

One of the scariest pieces of technology in your child's hand is a cell phone!

Did you know...

- the average teen sends over 2,000 texts every month¹.
- In those texts, 39% of all teens have sent a sexually suggestive text.
- 20% have sent a nude picture or video of themselves².
- there are 500,000 predators active online daily³ and 2.3 billion pornography websites available in their browser⁴.
- 60% of teens admit to being cyber-bullied⁵.

As a parent of four children, I am constantly worried about how to make sure the proper protections are in place to make sure they are safe on their phones. Here are 4 steps you can take to help protect your child from the dangers on their cell phone.

1 Evaluate

The greatest mistake I have seen parents make with their children and cell phones is the fact that they actually gave them one in the first place! In today's world, it seems like every child over the age of about 10 has a cell phone. In fact, I believe that teens think a cell phone is an automatic right they have (even though they are rarely the ones paying the bill).

A teen with a cell phone is a privilege, not a right. As a privilege, it should be earned, conditional, and revocable. I often get asked, "What age should I get a phone for my child?" I always tell parents that there is no magic number. When you consider it as a privilege, then I think your child, at a minimum, should be responsible, working to their ability in school, and trustworthy.

As a big believer in positive reinforcement, I believe you can use a cell phone as the ultimate reward your child can earn for progress in these areas. Further, I would suggest that you have a honest discussion in your family to consider if your child actually needs a cell phone. Because of all the possible dangers a cell phone introduces into your child's life, I tend to believe that holding off as long as possible is better.

As teens get older, they become more involved in sports, youth group, hanging with their friends, etc. As they are out of the house more, the need for a cell phone becomes greater to stay connected and communicate with them. So, before you head to the store and buy a phone, evaluate the need and the conditions in which your child can earn a cell phone. It would be a great idea to put your thoughts in writing and give it to your child so they know exactly how and when they can get a cell phone.

2 Educate

Once you have decided the terms and conditions for your child getting a cell phone, the next step is to educate yourself on the best plan and phone to get.

Over the last few years, plans have increasingly moved to the unlimited data model, which is good for parents. When I first got a cell phone for my oldest child, I was amazed at how much data she used every month! She consistently used ten times more data each month than I did. Plan for that if you are using a shared data plan with your family.

Secondly, each phone is a little different. Without trying to fuel the iPhone vs. Android war, iPhones do have more parental controls available out-of-the-box. In the Screen Time settings, Apple has given you the ability to control important settings on the phone. Be sure to educate yourself on what plan will be best for your family and which phone will allow you to best protect your child.

3 Communicate

Failed expectations are often a result of improper communication. Before you ever give your child a phone, be sure to sit down with your spouse and decide what exact expectations you have for your child with their phone. What are they allowed to do? What are they not allowed to do? I encourage you to write these down so there is no room for miscommunication in the future.

Here are the rules my wife and I made when we gave our child their phone:

- If you set a password on your phone, you have to tell us what it is, even when you change it.
- You may not download content (apps, music, movies, TV shows, ringtones, etc.) without asking first so we can approve it.
- You may only use texting or messaging apps to talk to people we approve you to talk with (consider writing out who they are allowed to talk to).
- You are never allowed to delete history, texts, messages, or emails in whole or in part (including sent ones).
- You need to ask permission each time before you video chat or Facetime anyone other than us (including incoming).
- You may not take your phone to (list places such as: school, church, teen activities, etc).
- You may not listen to your phone with headphones in the car (unless it's a long trip, with permission) or at the mall or stores.
- At bedtime, you must place your phone on the kitchen table (or another designated spot) for the night to charge.
- You are responsible for the cost of repairs from damage on your phone.
- Any overage fees incurred from your phone will be 100% your responsibility (be sure to clearly define what would constitute overage fees).

- We have the right to have immediate access to your phone, without notice, at any time we choose.
- Failure to follow any of these rules will result in immediate loss of your phone as well as possible grounding.

Once you establish your own rules, I suggest that you print them and have them sign the bottom, just to formalize it more. I also suggest that you store them in the notes section of their new phone so they always have the rules with them!

4 Implement

Once you have evaluated the need, educated yourself on plans and phones, and communicated rules and expectations, it is now time to implement the new phone.

When you purchase the phone, there are a few action items you should do before you physically hand the phone over to your child.

First, you will want to set the parental controls on the phone. Go through each setting and decide if you want to restrict or allow it on your child's phone.

Secondly, you should install a web filter. There are several good options out there that do a good job at filtering web content. My personal favorite is Circle Home Plus that not only filters internet content inside your home on all devices, but also any internet connection your child takes their phone to and even on cellular. Another good option is Covenant Eyes.

Lastly, you may consider adding monitoring software that can allow you to see their texts (even deleted ones), web traffic, and photos from a remote web portal. One software solution I have used with success in the past is Webwatcher.

Although handing your child a cell phone can be a very scary thing, I think there are steps you can take to help protect your child from the inherent dangers that come with a phone. Even with the best practices in place, your child will likely still make mistakes. As parents, you then have an opportunity to teach them better ways to use their phone and keep themselves out of danger.

If you have any questions, please feel free to reach out! We would love to help. You can email me at mmhiggins@hopechildrenshome.org.

1 <https://www.textrequest.com/blog/texting-statistics-answer-questions/>
 2 <http://www.guardchild.com/teenage-sexting-statistics/>
 3 <https://childsafety.losangelescriminallawyer.pro/children-and-grooming-online-predators.html>
 4 <https://www.josh.org/wp-content/uploads/Porn-Epidemic-Executive-Synopsis-9.25.2018.pdf>
 5 <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/09/27/a-majority-of-teens-have-experienced-some-form-of-cyberbullying/>



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