

PARENTING

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TIPS

Mobile Phones and Your Child

If your child is asking for a mobile phone it is not surprising. The use of mobile phones by children is booming. As a parent, you may see benefits in terms of safety and the ability to monitor your child if they have a mobile phone. On the other hand, you might have concerns about the health effects and the costs involved. You may also be worried about who your child talks to on their phone. When trying to weigh up the risks and benefits of a child having a mobile phone, parents can sometimes be uncertain about the best course of action. This guide aims to provide you with information and suggestions that may be helpful.

The long-term effects of mobile phones on children's health are yet to be determined.

Recently, an independent expert group was set up by the British Government to examine and report on all the available evidence on the effects of mobile phones on health (the Stewart Report). The report concludes, on the basis of current evidence, that the health of the nation is not at risk from mobile phone technologies.

However, the Stewart Report also states that it is not possible to say that exposure to radio frequency radiation from mobile phones is totally without risk.

Where children are concerned, the expert group notes that youngsters may be more vulnerable to radio frequency radiation because of their developing nervous system and because they will have a longer lifetime of exposure than their parents.

Therefore, they recommend that "the widespread use of mobile phones by children for non-essential calls should be discouraged". This suggests that it is sensible for parents to set limits on the amount of time that their children spend on a mobile phone. This applies to young children in particular.

Mobile phone ownership and use by children is increasing.

A detailed report about children and mobile phones (Mobile Youth: Market intelligence, 2002) gives some very interesting facts and insights:

- At the moment, 2% of Australian 5–9 year-olds and nearly 33% of 10–14 year-olds own a mobile phone. Market researchers expect that by 2004 this will increase to 11% of 5–9 year-olds and 55% of 10–14 year-olds.
- It is clear from market research reports that the industry is actively seeking ways to increase mobile phone use in children and teenagers.

Children and parents have different ideas about the benefits of mobile phones.

Parents may see the mobile phone as a practical way of keeping in touch with their children; that is, as a monitoring device. For children and adolescents it is much more than that. It can be a status symbol, a toy, and an instant communication medium for their social network.

- Mobile phones are a fashion icon. Young people are able to express their individuality by personalising their phones. For example, they may change the phone cover to reflect the latest popular image. Children enjoy additional features such as changing ring tones, games, downloadable images and Internet access.
- Children and adolescents have enthusiastically embraced text messaging using Short Messaging Service (SMS). Market research tells us that only 10% of SMS use is by adults. TV programs, youth magazines, and youth oriented advertising encourage children to use SMS for such things as entering competitions and voting on popular issues.
- Boys aged between 14 and 18 years are the heaviest users of SMS.
- The attractive part of SMS for young people is privacy. In fact, youngsters create their own language and codes. The 'in' group understands the

codes. SMS is 'cool'. In situations where mobile phone use is discouraged or disallowed, for example in classrooms, SMS is a way youngsters can contact their friends without drawing attention to themselves.

Ideas

If you are thinking about letting your child have a mobile phone, weigh up the pros and cons before you make a decision. If you decide that it is OK for your child to own their own phone, or use one belonging to another member of the family, here are some ideas to bear in mind. The strategies described below may help you to *protect* your child from any risks involved, *teach* your child good phone habits, and *monitor* their mobile phone use.

Protect

Consider how you can protect your child from the possibilities of health and financial risks of having a mobile phone.

- Think about ways to limit your child's exposure to radio frequency radiation emitted by mobile phones. Given the possibility that younger children may be more at risk, it would be wise to place firm restrictions on their use of the phone. You may wish to make it clear that the mobile is used only for emergencies. Some of the strategies in the 'Monitor' section will help you to introduce these limits to your child.
- Plan ahead to protect your child from the financial risks of having a mobile phone. Become an informed consumer. Look at the fine print about plans and contracts. Check on all the costs involved with mobile phone use. Discuss with your child, and set limits about, what are reasonable costs and who is to pay them. Consider a pre-pay option for your child. Many parents use this as a way of controlling their children's spending on phone use.

Teach

Here are some ideas for you to help your child learn to be a safe, responsible mobile phone user.

- Many adults have mobile phones just to make phone calls and may be unaware of all the exciting features of this device. To help your child become a responsible mobile phone user you need to be informed about the other things a mobile phone can do apart from making a phone call. Find out, or ask

your child to show you, all the features of the mobile phone. Encourage them to talk about new features as they become available. Discuss with them how often and why they use these features. Ask your child to teach you some text message 'language' and short cuts.

- Become familiar with the way in which other media like TV, magazines and the Internet make use of SMS for competitions, promotions and advertising. Talk to your children about their use of SMS for these purposes. Use this as an opportunity to discuss how media messages persuade us to do things. Set reasonable limits to the use of SMS for competitions and obtaining products, if necessary.
- Teach your child to cope with consumer pressure. Market research tells us that there are likely to be pressures from the peer group, and product promotion, to own a mobile phone or to use it for specific purposes. Talk to your child about any pressures they may be experiencing and ways that they can deal appropriately with these pressures. It would be particularly important to discuss strategies for dealing with such pressures if you decide that your child should not have a mobile phone.
- Teach your child to be aware of stranger danger in the electronic as well as the real world. Strangers who send text messages or make contact by voice mail may not be who they claim to be. Ask your child to tell you if they receive a message or call from someone they do not know.
- Communicating by phone can be a poor substitute for face-to-face communication. Children need opportunities to learn the subtle aspects of interacting with others, such as facial expressions and gestures that accompany speech. Also, communicating with friends by phone does not give children the chance to practise the skills needed for group discussions. Parents can play an important role in teaching and encouraging face-to-face communication skills.

Monitor

Consider how you can use the mobile phone to stay in touch with your child.

- Think about times when it is necessary to keep track of your child. That is, times when your child needs to check in with you, or be contacted by you when you are not with them. An example is arranging to be picked up from a sporting activity. With a young child, you may wish to make it clear that they only use the phone for such purposes. Consistent with

recommendations to restrict young children's exposure to radio frequency radiation, it would make sense to keep the phone calls short on these occasions.

- Consider using text messaging to contact your child. SMS is quicker than a phone call, and a cheaper way of keeping in touch. Think about some fun ways of showing affection, like putting a few hugs and kisses (XOX) at the end of the message.
- If you decide to let your child have a mobile phone so that you can keep track of their whereabouts, don't let this be a substitute for forward planning. Even though it is reassuring to know your youngster can contact you in an emergency, it is still necessary to know, in advance, who they are with, where they are going, and what time they will be back.

It is often helpful to have some household rules to monitor your child's use of the mobile phone. Of course, you would need to take into account your child's age when doing this.

- With teenagers you might suggest times when the mobile gets turned off, such as family meal times, celebrations, and other times when family members are talking to each other face to face.
- In particular, consider having rules about:
 - Whether your child is allowed to use the home phone to ring someone's mobile. This can become a very expensive chat with friends.
 - Who is allowed to use your child's mobile phone, and under what circumstances. For example, in your family it may, or may not, be acceptable to lend the phone to a friend for a brief call.
 - Who your child is allowed to give the phone number to.
 - How to keep the phone safe from theft and being misplaced.
 - What to do if the phone 'goes missing'.
 - Not giving any personal information by voice or SMS to strangers.

Pitfalls

Despite the best plans, things do not always go smoothly when you try to introduce limits to children. Here are some ideas to consider if your child does not follow family's rules on using the mobile phone.

In the first place, set up the rules in consultation with your child. This way your child will have some 'ownership' of them. Remember to be consistent in applying the rules. If the rules are not working, have a family meeting to review them.

When your child uses the mobile phone responsibly think of ways of encouraging this behaviour. Give lots of positive feedback. For example, let your child know that you have noticed and are very pleased about how responsible they have been.

Think about reasonable consequences for not following the household rules. For example, for a minor breach of the rules, a logical consequence is that the phone is confiscated for a short time (e.g. for one day). For more serious breaches, the 'off limits' period could be longer.

Help

One way to gain more ideas about this relatively new issue for parents is to talk to others who are responsible for children's welfare.

- **Find out if your child's school has a policy about mobile phones during school time.** The school's policy may give you some good ideas about how to manage mobile phone use in your home. If there is no policy, encourage your school to develop one via a consultation process involving staff, parents and students. Such a policy gives reassurance that your child is encouraged to act responsibly with a mobile phone in school time.
- **Talk to other parents.** Find out what the situation is in other families. Talk with the parents of your child's friends about what their views are on mobile phone use. Let them know what your rules are for your child.
- For confidential advice call **Parentline 13 22 89**.

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