



Cell Phone Rules

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Don't just "phone it in" when it comes to setting limits on cell phone use to guide and protect your kids.

Cell phones. We love them, and we hate them. They are easy to love when you find yourself on the side of the road with a flat tire, or when you're trying to track down your daughter and her friend after being separated while shopping in the mall. The love fades when the teenager sitting behind you at the movies won't hang up. Or even worse, one goes off in your purse right smack in the middle of a wedding (guilty as charged)! The cell phone has replaced the home phone, and most teens couldn't recite their top three friends' home numbers if you offered them a cash prize. Their cell phones are their mobile "friend lists" that keep them in touch around the clock with their top one hundred.

Recently, while speaking at an event for Christian middle school and high school girls, I asked the students to think about what one item they each would take with them if they were going to spend time alone on a deserted island. The majority chose the cell phone. It beat out the iPod, laptop computer and, unfortunately, even the Bible.

As a parents, it's important for us to understand this technology's appeal, know what it can offer as well as the possible dangers it poses and set limits to guide and protect our kids. Whether your child is begging for a cell phone or has one already, here are some things to consider:

- If you aren't comfortable with your child receiving (or making) calls or texts past bedtime, you might want to have her turn her phone in at night or let her know you will be checking the bill for the time-stamp on calls and texts.
- Most providers have peak and off-peak hours. Make sure your child knows when the off-peak hours begin, as well as any expectations you have about when calls can be made.
- Most cell phone companies offer text-messaging packages that give users incentive to text rather than talk. If your child is new to a cell phone, you might consider a plan with minimum (if any) text messages until they can prove themselves trustworthy. Parents should also explain to their children that text messaging is not an acceptable forum for discussing more serious matters.
- Cell phones often come equipped with the ability to receive instant messages that have been forwarded from the user's computer. If you are not comfortable with this practice, simply deactivate the feature or instruct your child to do so.
- Many cell phones on the market today come equipped with wireless Internet capabilities. According to a Pew study, a quarter of teen cell phone users access the Web on their phones. The Wall Street Journal reported that Web sites intended for cell phones are

even harder to filter than regular Internet pages. Again, if you are not comfortable with this feature, deactivate it or instruct your child not to access the Web.

- A camera and video feature is standard on many cell phones sold today. If your child's phone has this feature, make sure you discuss safety rules regarding picture and video uploading. One police detective in Louisville, Kentucky, had this to say: "A lot of the cases that were coming out, some of them were of males taking pictures of their genitals and sending those images out." He went on to say that most of the time the pictures were taken as a practical joke with someone else's camera phone. The Metro Crimes Against Children Unit did not think it was a laughing matter and commented about the person taking the picture, "It's his own body part, it's still child pornography. They're producing it, they're distributing, they're in possession of it, and those are all felonies."
- If your child is driving, make sure she knows that it is never acceptable to talk or text while driving. More than a quarter of cell phone owners (28 percent) admit they sometimes do not drive as safely as they should while they use their mobile devices. More and more fatalities are occurring as a result of distracted drivers who are using their phones. Many states have passed laws to make it illegal to talk on a cell phone while driving, while other states have proposed the legislation.
- Cell phones are already a permanent fixture in our lives. And soon, the industry standard will be cell phones that consolidate all the teen favorites into one small device. Teens will use their phones to talk, text, receive IMs being sent to their computers, access their music library, surf the Web, check their MySpace and Facebook pages and even post comments and upload pictures and video clips straight to Web sites from their phones. For portability and communicating on the run, the cell phone is the central piece of technology that connects teens to their favorite activities. Best of all, it fits in a back pocket. No wonder kids beg for one of their own.