

KIDS AND TECHNOLOGY: SOME HELPFUL GUIDELINES

By Sherri Snyder, MA, LMHC



It seems that technology has moved far too quickly than most of us adults can keep up with. Kids seem to be more adept at all of this technology, smarter, and more agile with all the changes and updates. (I still have the “old fashioned” flip cell phone and am quite content with it. I can only handle a certain number of changes in technology at a time.) As a psychotherapist in private practice, I see many parent/child struggles around “cell phones” and computer use. So after many, many, many discussions with family after family, I decided that an “article” might be in order to help guide parents with this technology craze. I realize that the content of this article may not be so popular with the kids. But that is not necessarily my goal here.

Whether you are giving your child or teen a cell phone for the first time or you have already given them a cell phone, you may want to follow the guidelines below. It is all too easy to just hand your child a cell phone and say “*Be Careful with it! Don’t drop it or lose it!*”. We wouldn’t hand our teens the keys to the car and simply say, “Be careful”. So why would we do that with cell phones or computers? Kids and teens need safety guidelines, limits and structure. Of course we know they are going to test those rules and break them. There are way too many things one can do with a cellphone these days! So I recommend that you set it up like a “technology contract” or “cell phone agreement” before you hand them a cell phone. With any agreement that you establish, you also want to set up “consequences” for misuse ahead, so there are no surprises. These will be discussed later in the article.

I suggest that parents start a conversation about safety and security, what is age appropriate conversation and photos, cell phone etiquette, what cell phones are for and what they are not for. Parents might even role-play text conversations, how to set limits and deal with inappropriate texts they might receive. There has also been a great amount of research on the negative impact of cell phones and computers on sleep and school concentration. Many kids have been found up late texting until very late hours of the night which interrupts healthy sleep patterns, causing kids to have difficulty paying attention in school. Cell Phones while driving is yet another safety concern. Some states have made “Teens Texting and Driving illegal”. We know all too well the danger in being distracted while driving. Adults/Parents need to model this for our kids.

Another area of concern is “what” kids are sending and receiving on their cell phones. According to an article by Rose Garrett, 20-60 percent of teens are “sexting” (not sure what it means?) Sexting is sending sexually provocative messages or visual images. Kids as young as 9 years old may be doing it (according to Susan Lipkins, psychologist specializing in bullying and hazing). Once provocative photos are sent on a cell phone, they can then be uploaded to the internet and there is no control over what happens to that picture after that. Parents and kids need to know what legal ramifications could ensue if they are caught “creating or being in possession of pornography”, which was probably not their intention in the first place. A fabulous article by Larry Magid, “Teen Sexting: Troubling but don’t overreact” provides parents some guidelines on how to respond to this issue.

Communicate with your kids- don’t lecture. Your kids need to hear about this information but in a way that is palatable for kids. You don’t want them to hear “Blah, blah, blah...”. Research together! Have a contest and see how many articles they can find on the web about child or teen “cell phone safety” or “cell phone etiquette”. Ask them to write about “how they want to be viewed or seen by their peers”. Discuss how photos from their cell phone can be disseminated on the internet. Check out a website (possibly one listed below) together! Let your kids know that you are aware that this stuff happens and

open discussions casually about it at dinner about it. Try not to get into “punishing mode”, where you are threatening to take their phone away every other day.

Here are some initial guidelines for cell phone use:

1. Your cell phone is a privilege and may be taken away if it is misused.
2. You may use your cell phone between ___ and ____ pm. You may not use your cell phone during classtime or during dinner.
3. Parents have the right to monitor texts, pictures and conversations on cell phones for saftey purposes. (Explain why you are doing this- to ensure their safety, not to intrude. They might be mad, but that is ok. Your job as a parent is to supervise. As you develop more trust in your kids, you may not need to monitor as much).
4. Cell phones must be placed in _____ room by 9 pm and not used after that time. (For older teens, this time could be 9:30 or 10 pm).
5. You may not use your cellphone while driving. (There are new features on some cars that can monitor this use- CellControl).
6. Any pictures or texts received or sent on your cell phone must be “age appropriate”.
7. If these rules/guidelines are not followed, parents have the right to withhold cell phone use for _____ amount of time.
8. Cell phone use is a privilege- this privilege may be taken away if misused or abused.
9. Child/Teen may not let anyone else use their phone.
10. If a parent calls or texts the teen, they must answer the phone.

Some excellent web resources:

www.safeteens.com/cell-phone-safety-tips

www.cellphonesafety.org/safer/teens.htm

www.teencellsafety.com (offers an educational DVD on cellphone safety for \$19.99)

www.education.com/reference/article/teen-sexting-troubling-do-not-overreact (L. Magid)

www.education.com/magazine/article/child-sexting-parents (R. Garrett)

www.connectsafely.org (cyberbullying and cyber safety)

the next article will focus on computer safety.

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