

Is My Child Ready for a Cell Phone?

This is a common question for many parents. Generally most children are not in need of a cellphone in elementary school, but every family makes this decision based on a number of factors. Here are some things to consider:

* Your child's emotional maturity. If your child has difficulty reining in his or her emotions in person, I guarantee you he or she will not be able to do it online or over text messages. Just because your child is technologically savvy, meaning he or she knows how to use technology, does not mean that he or she knows how to use it responsibly! Technology access is a privilege, not a right, for children and teens.

* Many families write up a "phone contract" that outlines the agreement between parent and child. There are also a number of settings that you can arrange through your cellphone provider that will help you to monitor your child's activity. Things that are important to consider in setting rules for phone use: defined hours that the phone needs to be put away, an agreement not to let friends use the cellphone, & being clear that the phone will not be used to intentionally engage in mean behavior towards anyone else. I recommend that your child knows that you or another trusted adult can spot-check his or her phone on occasion.

* Ongoing conversations about phone use. Even with the best parent/child phone agreement, mistakes happen, and you want your child to come to you if there is a problem. If your child only receives the message that he or she will receive severe consequences for unacceptable online activity, then your child will likely do two things: your child will try to hide his or her activity from you, and your child will not come to you if he or she encounters problems. It is better to set the expectations for online behavior but help your child to feel that you understand that no one is perfect, and that you will be there for him or her in a time of need, no matter what.

* Finally, a quick note about social media. Almost all social media applications are geared towards young adults and adults, which is why children need to be 13 to open an account. Social media is incredibly powerful. It can be a wonderful way to connect with others but it can also be a vehicle for incredible cruelty. Adolescents have a drive to feel wanted, needed, and liked by their peers, and social media allows them to compare and contrast their life to their peers all of the time. The amount of "friends" that one has or the number of "likes" that a picture gets can have profound impacts on a teen's social and emotional health. Teens engaging in cyberbullying is a real and pervasive issue in every community, and social media platforms are one of the primary ways that this is done. Checking in with your child about his or her social media use, what he or she sees online and has questions about, talking about how most people present only a small sliver of reality on social media, and helping your child learn how to get out of a difficult situation he or she may encounter on line are all worthwhile ongoing conversations to have with your teen.

As always, if you have concerns about your child's social and/or emotional well-being, please feel free to contact me at franza@pvrsk12.org or by calling the school.

Andrea Franz, School Adjustment Counselor