

Is It OK to Get My 11-Year-Old A Cell Phone?

Cell phones are devices that have been strongly associated with cyberbullying. Yet, they're also extremely convenient and help busy parents keep in touch with their children. I'm often asked by parents, "What is the right age to get a child a cell phone?"

What *is* a cell phone? By the early 1990s, the first wave of real cell phone use began in the United States, but those phones were very different from the cell phones of today – they were large (about the size of a banana), and just *made phone calls*.

Today, what we call cell phones are actually not "phones" - they are mobile computing devices that, as it happens, are able to make phone calls. It's notable, though, that more than half of the college freshman in our research at the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center at Bridgewater State University said that they use their "cell phones" to make phone calls 20% of the time *or less*. Eighty percent of the time or more, they're using the devices for texting, for surfing on the Internet, for posting information on their social networking profiles, or for taking electronic pictures or videos. When you get your child a "cell phone," what you may really be getting them is a small, mobile computer.

Not every "cell phone" has Internet and texting, and that's the first decision you need to consider. Is the phone for safety? Does your child *need* texting and Internet access?

In our research, it's not the *phoning* part that gets kids into bullying or into being bullied. The problems around cyberbullying are associated with texting and posting things online. Kids sometimes text or post cruel or unkind remarks about each other. They may reveal someone's secrets or personal information or spread rumors. Cell phones make it easy to take pictures or videos, and to send those to anyone. Many kids today know that when they send information or pictures electronically, it can potentially be sent to anyone and everyone; but being kids, it's very hard

for them to picture this happening, perhaps sometime in the hazy future. Kids today may even send obscene text or pictures, feeling sure that the only person who will ever see the highly personal photo is the one person they send it to.

Every cruel, or obscene, piece of information sent electronically can be kept forever. It can be posted, shown to anyone, or used to start legal trouble.

The younger kids are, the more likely they are to make these kinds of mistakes. But you can get your child a “cell phone” *without* giving them powerful technologies. If you feel like your child might not understand how easily electronic information can be shared, you can still get them a cell phone for safety – but ask the cell phone company to turn off the Internet access and texting.

Dr. Elizabeth Englander is the Director of the Massachusetts Aggression Reduction Center at Bridgewater State University. Do you have situations or questions you’d like addressed? Email them to bullyingbb@gmail.com.