FAMILY Tech Talk NIGHT
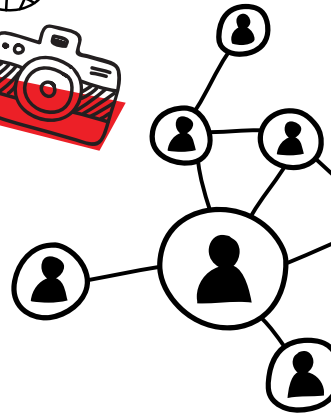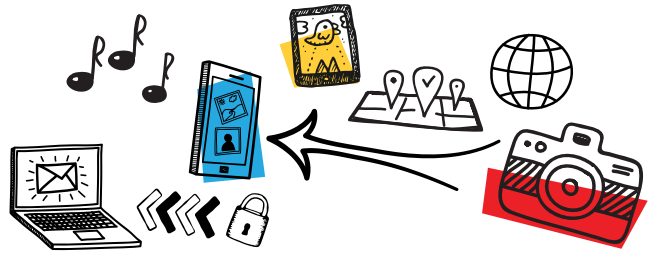Inspiring Digital Responsibility

Cell Phone and Smartphone FAQs

At what age should my child have a cell phone or smartphone?

There is no magic age when every child should have a cell phone. That's a decision that depends on the child and the parents, and it's an expensive one. To help you determine whether your child is ready for a cell phone (and just as important, whether you're ready for your child to have a cell phone), ask yourself the following questions:

- **Why does my child want a phone?** Even before the age of 10, some kids start feeling the social pressure to have a cell phone. Can your child give you a rational argument for wanting a phone—other than "everyone else has one"?

- **Does my child need a cell phone to reach me?** Some parents give their child a cell phone for safety reasons, so they'll always be in touch. That typically happens when the child becomes more independent, say by going out with friends or traveling without the parent to or from school or after-school activities.

- **Will my child use the phone responsibly?** Your child should be mature enough to take care of the phone, keep it charged, not lose it, and follow the rules you set for using it.

- **Does our family have a landline?** Increasingly, as most adults have their own phones, they're choosing to get rid of the "house phone," which can create a need for kids to have their own devices.

What kind of features does my child need in a phone?

Again, this depends on your child's age and maturity level and your own comfort level.

- If the sole purpose of the phone is to keep you and your child in touch, then a basic phone that makes and receives calls will do. Prepaid cell phone plans may help you manage a budget and ensure that time spent on the phone is not wasteful. You can even program the phone to dial and accept calls only from preapproved numbers.

- If your child is in middle school or above, you might want to sign up for a plan that allows unlimited texting. Cell phones have become an important way for preteens and teenagers to communicate, and they prefer texting over calling. Just remember to set clear rules for when the phone must remain off.

- If your child is begging for a smartphone (a mobile phone with advanced computing ability and Internet connectivity), ask yourself whether you're comfortable giving her full access to a portable device that allows her to create and view videos, update social networking sites, browse the Web, download apps, and more. Smartphones are powerful devices, so you should be confident that your child will use the technology responsibly.

What rules should I set for cell phone use?

You want your child to use the phone safely and responsibly. Some basic rules are:

- **Respect others.** That means no sending rude texts, forwarding rude texts, or taking embarrassing photos or videos of others. And most of all, no looking at your phone when you're talking to someone in real life. (Parents need to model this one, too.)

- **Respect yourself.** No sexy texts, photos, or videos. Remind your child not to send anything that has the potential to embarrass himself or make himself feel bad for sending it—once it's out there, it's out there for good.

- **Keep your phone safe.** Remind your child to keep track of her phone and not to share it or her password with friends. Lost or stolen phones are expensive to replace and can be used by classmates in inappropriate ways.
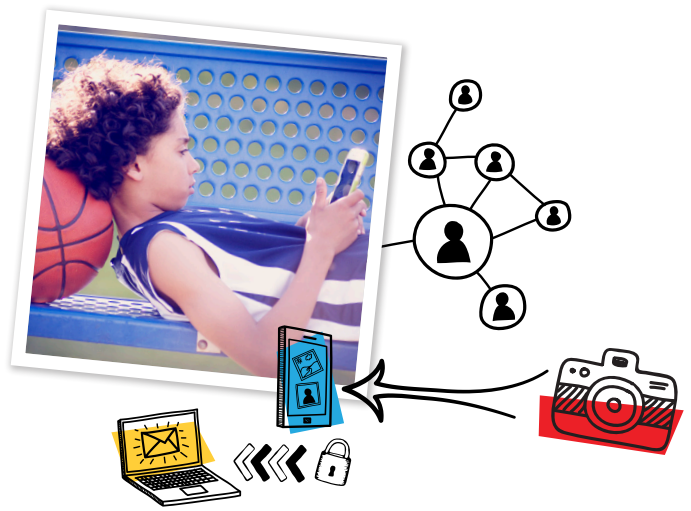
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- **Turn the phone off at school, at the dinner table, and at night.** If your child is a teenager and drives, no texting or talking while driving! Not only is texting while driving dangerous, it's also against the law in many states.

- **Have the whole family charge their cell phones at night in a central location**, somewhere other than a bedroom where they might be a distraction. If your child has a smartphone, make sure your child checks with you before downloading apps, even free ones. Consider putting a password on your app store account. Then take a good look at the app description and ratings. Many apps aren't appropriate for children.

How can I help my child use the cell phone appropriately?

Cell phones are, by their portable nature, private. It's difficult for a parent to know who their child is talking to or texting with. Let your children know that you trust them but that you want to make sure they learn to use a cell phone safely and wisely. In cases where you feel their safety is at risk, here are some steps you can take:

- Let your children know that anything they do on a phone app could be made public (a screenshot takes just a second to grab), just as it could on a social networking site. Remind them to think before they text or share.

- Lots of apps ask to use location data or access the camera and microphone. You can go through apps individually and disable this access for any that don't need it or that you don't want using this information.

- Check the call and text history on the phone if you feel you need to, but be sure to let your child know you might do this from time to time. It's best to set a precedent of trust versus one of spying, which can jeopardize the lines of communication between you

and your child. You can also review your cell phone records to find out whether your child has used the phone during school hours or when he should be sleeping.

- Another option is to use the parental controls available through your wireless carrier. Typically the controls will let you filter out certain content, restrict the time of day your child can use the phone, set limits on the minutes your child can use, and specify who she can talk with and text. And if you feel it's needed, you can buy software to load onto your child's phone that allows you to monitor how and when the phone is used.

- Consider encouraging your child to use his allowance to pay for part of the cell phone or the monthly data plan. When children become invested in the technology, it can encourage them to use it more responsibly.

- Teach your child balance and good time management with smartphones and other devices, and model those good habits yourself. Remind your child to stay in control of the device and not to let it control him. Reinforce the idea that being a good digital citizen means treating people with respect online, just as she would in person.

Parents, have you had The Talk?

Take the survey at
FamilyTechTalkNight.com/survey

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