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What Age is Appropriate for Children to be Provided with a Cell Phone?

Introduction

Recently, I was asked to speak at an Illinois Bar Association conference on the topic of "Understanding Child Sexual Abuse and the Technology Facilitated Complaint Victim". As a result of my presentation topic, I was also asked to provide input for the conference participants, who were family law judges and attorneys, on the issue of "What age is appropriate for a parent to provide their child with a cell phone?"



Background

For years, law enforcement recommended putting the family computer in an open area and also putting a piece of tape over the web-cam lens when it was not in use as excellent techniques to protect children from online child predators. Today, with children and young people using mobile devices like smart phones and tablets almost exclusively, neither of these safety techniques effectively protects children.

According to a study conducted by the Kaiser Family Foundation, there has been a huge increase over the years in media use among young people. The study found that 85% of teens aged 14 - 17 have cell phones, 69% of 11 - 13 year olds have cell phones, and 31% of children aged 8 - 10 have cell phones.¹

Traditional Cell Phone vs. Smart Phone

Traditional cell phones only allow the user to make and receive calls, texts, and, in some cases, take photos. A smartphone, on the other hand, allows the user to access the Internet and download apps-both of which can be very dangerous for children and young people.

Caring adults may want to consider purchasing basic cell phones for children as a technique to keep them safe. These types of phones are actually still available, and don't include a camera, texting, or internet access. Another consideration is going online and purchasing an unsophisticated "kids" type of cell phone that only has 4 to 5 call buttons that can be preprogrammed.

Sometimes, caring adults consider passing down one of their own phones. If this is the case, it is important to always turn off all the extra device features that have been enabled. This would limit a child's access to apps and websites that could pose a danger.

Consider the Child

Some parents focus on the danger of the child losing the new phone rather than being focused on the child having increased access to the Internet and being approached by an online predator. Not every child is the same - there is no magic numerical age for a parent to safely provide a child with a cell phone that does have Internet access.

The following are some behavioral characteristics and issues a parent who is contemplating buying a cell phone for their child should consider:

- How responsible is the child? An independent and responsible child fulfills obligations at home and at school.
- Does the child recognize consequences?
- Is the child accountable for his/her own actions? Does he or she resist blaming others?
- What is the maturity level of the child? This would include what general characteristics, emotional characteristics and social characteristics the child exhibits both to you and with their peers.
- Does the child require a cell phone for some type of medical or safety reason?
- Does the child realize that having a cell phone is a privilege and not an entitlement? When I was a uniformed police officer, I would tell teens I had stopped for a traffic violation that having a driver's license is a privilege and not a constitutional right. A person is issued a driver's license based on the driving skills one exhibits and the vehicular rules that one agrees to follow. The same can be said with a child getting a cell phone-there there must be certain rules that the child agrees to follow.

In most cases, a parent should have the final say on the boundaries connected with the cell phone as he or she is not only supplying and paying for the cell phone service, but also ultimately responsible for protecting the child from harm.

Creating Boundaries

The following are some issues a parent who has actually purchased a cell phone for their child should consider:

- In many cases, a parent can contact the cell phone provider and block Internet access and calls from phone numbers that the parent has not approved. Many cell phone companies allow the parent to cap the number of texts a user can send or receive as well as the number of voice minutes that the cell phone can be used.
- The parent should designate certain times that the cell phone needs to be turned off-for or instance, during family meals, after 10 p.m., and during school hours.
- Don't allow cell phones in your children's rooms at night in order to prevent them from texting or making calls after bedtime.
- If you purchase a smartphone, insist that parental permission is required for the download of each app on a mobile device. This is easily facilitated by a parent retaining the password that is required to install a new app on the device.
- Be vigilant-physically examine the new phone on a regular basis to make sure that it has not been modified. Check that the features you have disabled have not been re-enabled by your child or a schoolmate.
- If your child has a driver's license, insist that he or she never use the cell phone for calls or texting when driving.

Conclusion

Technology continues to rapidly change. Even if we do not have children of our own, it is important for us to partner with parents and uphold boundaries with the young people in our life when it comes to cell phone usage and social media. Parents, teachers, and all of us who are charged with protecting children must continue our efforts to stay abreast of the many new devices, software programs, and the latest apps that may be used by young people as well as child predators seeking to manipulate and sexually abuse children.

Reference:

1. "Generation M2, Media in the Lives of 8-to-18 Year Olds" A Kaiser Family Foundation Study, January 2010, Menlo Park, CA

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1) What are some ways that caring adults can protect children when it comes to cell phones?

- A) Closely monitor the content on the phone as part of a regular examination practice
 - B) Set boundaries on when and how the device may be used
 - C) Let them have unfettered access to the Internet
 - D) Options A and B
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