

Teens & Cellphones – A Primer



Sound Familiar?

“But Mom! Everyone at school has a cellphone! I’m the only one without!”

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WellConnectedMom.com

2011

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Teens & Cellphones - A Primer

Hi!

This guide was created to help moms like yourself who are questioning when...and if...you should allow your teen to carry a cellphone.

- What is the appropriate age?
- What type of limits should you instill?
- Do you need to teach a teen cellphone manners and safety?
- Should you check their text messages?
- And will sexting affect your child?



It is never too early to begin teaching your child the proper way to use a cellphone. Feel free to send this primer to your friends so they too can be aware of important facts and tips when considering a cellphone for their teen.

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Overview

Cellphones can be a powerful and an effective tool in communicating to others. Teens know this better than anyone else. For many teens, cellphones are their “lifeline” to their social life. In fact, [according to](#) a national survey from [CTIA](#) and [Harris Interactive](#),

Nearly half (47%) of US teens say their social life would end or be worsened without their cell phone, and nearly six in 10 (57%) credit their mobile device with improving their life.

The study goes on to reveal that according to teens, cellphones are the most telling thing about their social status or popularity behind clothing – even more so than watches, jewelry, or shoes!

Teens surveyed stated that they spend as much time texting as they do talking each month. This is especially true for girls. Teens prefer texting over talking because:

- it's faster
- they can multitask
- avoid verbal conversation
- it's fun

Parents appreciate cellphones too because they can be their “lifeline” to their kids since texting or calling is a great way to get a hold of them. LG conducted a national “LG Text Ed Survey” on teens 13-17 and their parents and found that 75% of these parents considered themselves “texters” and 86% of them have used texting to communicate with their teen. As a result of texting, parents feel closer to their teen.

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Like most parents, you are likely to be concerned about your teen's use of their cellphone. Or perhaps your children are younger and you believe that cellphone usage is not a concern...just yet. I used to think that way too. My oldest child is 8 years old. Why do I need to think about her use of cellphones at this age?

In my interview with Dr. Charles Sophy, a leading psychiatrist specializing in Adult, Child & Adolescent Psychiatry and the Medical Director for the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS), he stated that our children are learning acceptable cellphone behaviors long before they get their first phone.

During my interview with Dr. Sophy, I gleaned a lot about how to assess when your child is ready for a cellphone as well as how to instruct your child to use one. To see the full interview, see the [Dr. Sophy Interview on WellConnectedMom.com](#).

A Mom's Perspective

Dr. Sophy hit the nail on the head when he stated that "parenting begins with you the parent." In determining whether your child is ready for a cellphone, first assess your child's maturity. Ensure s/he is capable of taking care of the phone and using it wisely.

There is so much more to learn about having a cellphone than just its "cool" features. Once you're ready to give your teen a cellphone, take the time to educate your child first on how to use their cellphone. It's up to you, the parent, to teach them about "etiquette, appropriateness, and safety," according to Dr. Sophy.

In my preparation for the interview, I conducted a lot of research online. There is so much information out there on teens, cellphones, and driving, it's overwhelming. As a mom, I'm interested in knowing as much as possible how to protect my children, but there's just too much to take in. This guide will give you great preparation in readying your child for their first cellphone and being a good citizen while using it.

Besides driving a car, the cellphone is potentially one of the next most dangerous common technologies a teen can use.

Manners

Just what are manners and how important are they?

According to Wikipedia, “manners are the unenforced standards of conduct which demonstrate that a person is proper, polite, and refined. They are like laws in that they codify or set a standard for human behavior, but they are unlike laws in that there is no formal system for punishing transgressions, other than social disapproval. They are a kind of norm.”

As with any type of communication, manners are a must with texting. Manners show people that you have respect for them and that you value them. It’s no surprise that manners—good or bad— are taught or at least learned in the home. Children pick up cues from their parents on how to behave. Whether parents intentionally teach their children or not, monkey see, monkey do comes into play.



The LG Text Survey they found that 42% of parents texted someone while at the dinner table. Interestingly enough, 69% of teens admitted to the same behavior. Children are watching their parents and acceptable standards of behavior are being formed years before a child ever receives their first cellphone.

Many people believe that texting is a way of contacting someone without interrupting them. In theory, this assumption is correct. However, have you ever been with someone who receives a text as you’re talking with them? Immediately, reading that text becomes their number one priority. Do you do the same thing in front of your kids?

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Here are some cellphone etiquette tips to consider, practice, and share with your teen:

1. Don't text or talk if you are face-to-face talking with others.
2. Don't text or talk on the phone during mealtimes, family time, or late at night.
3. Refrain from texting and walking.
4. Never text and drive – accidents can happen within seconds.
5. Answer your phone in a bathroom? Not recommended. It invades others' personal space.
6. Private conversations in restaurants, waiting rooms, hallways, buses, etc. are difficult and you tend to talk louder to compensate for background noise. Let your voicemail take the call. If you must return the call, step outside.
7. Remember to turn your phone off or to vibrate during the movies, plays, shows, rehearsals, weddings, funerals, meetings, job interviews, church, library, museum, etc.
8. If a text or phone call comes in that you have to respond to immediately, excuse yourself but make your absence brief.
9. Do not use CAPITALS when texting people. They will interpret your tone as screaming.
10. Make your text messages brief. Verizon recommends using e-mail over texting for any message over 160 characters.
11. Don't text anything you're not willing to tell someone in person. Threats, insults, and hurtful messages are most likely to be forwarded to others to humiliate the original sender.
12. Do not take/accept any inappropriate pictures or texts. If you receive one, delete it immediately.
13. When texting, ensure you double check the phone number you're sending your text to.
14. Also double check your message, tone, and intention before sending. After you hit send, who knows how far and to whom your message will travel.
15. Even if people are texting or accepting calls while talking to you, don't repeat the same behavior back. Treat others how you want to be treated rather than how they treat you.
16. Model manners in your texts to your children when you text them. Treat them with the same respect you expect back.

A Mom's Perspective

Many of these tips are common sense. But reflect on your own behavior.

- Have you used your cellphone without an earpiece while driving?
- Have you checked your messages while driving?
- Have you fired off a text without checking it first only to find you caused friction with the person who received the e-mail?
- Have you interrupted a conversation to check a text or answer a call?



For many, convenience outweighs common sense. Remember, our children are watching us. This reminds me of one of my favorite songs that still bring tears to my eyes. It's called **Be Careful Little Eyes What You See**. The song isn't about phone etiquette, but it reminds us that all of our actions are being watched by our children. If we want them to grow up to be loving, caring, generous, happy adults, we must first model for them the behaviors to emulate.

I have to admit, before writing this, I didn't think much about when I was using my phone. Now that I'm more aware, I've actually caught myself checking my e-mail or a text while at a restaurant, at our table at home during lunch, and while sitting at a red light while driving. Oops. And who do you think is usually with me while I am doing this? My five and eight year olds.

I am making a commitment now to model the behavior for my children that I would like to see them demonstrate when they are teens. How about you?

Safety

According to LG, on average, a teen sends a text message **every 14 minutes**. If you multiply that across the US, there are **over 20,000 texts being sent every second!**



Now that's a lot of communicating!

But are teens communicating at times and places that are appropriate?

This article will provide a good foundation for you to have a conversation with your teen about cellphone safety.

Cellphones can give teens a tremendous boost in their personal safety since they can call someone immediately if they need help or are stranded. Teens can let their parents know where they are, call for directions to get out of an unknown place, etc. According to a national survey from [CTIA](#) and [Harris Interactive](#),

80% [of teens] say their cell phone provides a sense of security while on the go, confirming that the cell phone has become their mobile safety net when needing a ride (79%), getting important information

But cellphones can also pose many risks. There has been a lot in the news in the past few years about the dangers of driving while using a cellphone or texting— and justly so. We have all heard tragic stories where young people were killed as a result. Even if your child doesn't drive yet, cellphone safety is still a concern. In this post, we'll cover cellphone safety while behind the wheel and general safety tips for your teen (and you!)

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Cellphone Use While Driving

The **LG Text Survey** found that nearly half of the parents surveyed admitted to texting while driving. So it's no surprise to learn that 45% of teens have likewise admitted to texting while driving. Yet, only 4% of surveyed parents believed their teen was texting and driving.



If we are texting and driving, most likely so will our kids. Teaching our children safety begins with us, as parents, and what behaviors we model for them.

What Are the Risks of Driving while Texting or Talking on the Phone?

According to Diane Griffith, reporter for **myOptumHealth**,

"You have four times the risk of being in a crash if you're on the phone while driving. Talking on a cell phone while driving lowers your reaction time, studies confirm. This is believed to be caused by a phenomenon known as "perceptual blindness." It suggests that when a person focuses on one task (like talking on the phone), he or she fails to notice unexpected distractions - even when looking at them."

By the time a driver using his/her cellphone notices they need to brake ASAP, it's too late. More rear-end crashes occur as a result of cellphone using drivers than non-cellphone using drivers. If your teen is driving the car with other teens in it, distractions will occur.

General Safety

OK, great, your teen is not texting while driving (you hope!). But texting or talking on their cellphone can still be unsafe. As you have seen from the video, talking on the phone or texting creates a lot of distraction. Often times, the teen is not aware of his/her surroundings while using his/her phone.



As a general rule, make sure your teen always keeps a keen eye on what is going on around him/her. Teens need to be taught that just because they are on the phone, the world does not stop around them.

Walking while Talking or Texting

This could be an accident waiting to happen. Here's what could happen, you could...

- **trip and fall** – hurting yourself or others
- **disturb others** walking on the streets with your loud talking
- annoy the person(s) you're walking with
- **not pay attention** as you walk into a busy street
- **miss the horn blast** from an oncoming car
- **get hit by the motorist** using their cellphone while driving
- **get lost** by not paying attention where you're going

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Safe Tips to Follow – Don't Text/Talk on the Phone When...

- **Alone in busy public places** – like malls, airports, bus stations, etc. unless you are sitting down and in a reasonably safe place. Kidnappers and predators are looking for people who are distracted.
- **Walking to your car alone** in a crowded parking lot. You will be distracted with your conversation, giving strangers the upper edge in pushing you into the car and letting themselves in.
- **Pumping gas.** OK, according to Snopes.com, this is an urban legend. No proof has ever been provided showing that a cellphone can ignite a fire at a gas station. Nonetheless, cellphone manufacturers Erickson and Nokia recommend turning off your cellphones while at the pump.
- **Flying in an airplane.** The U.S. Federal Aviation Administration believes that cellphones and other portable electronic devices may give off radio signals that can affect aircraft communications, navigation and flight control. Cellphone use on airplanes has been banned in the US since 1991.
- Waiting alone by a street, driveway, busy intersection, or deserted area for a ride. You won't be aware of who is coming to pick you up to take you away.
- **Driving.** It's commonly believed that drivers are safer if using a speakerphone with their cellphone in the car. However, there is overwhelming evidence to suggest that holding a cellphone or using a speakerphone is equally dangerous.
- **Driving.** If you receive a call you need to take, pull over in a safe, well-lit area. Ensure your doors are locked and make your conversation brief. Tell the person you will call back when you arrive to your destination.
- **Driving with someone else on the phone.** If the person driving you is talking on the phone or texting, offer to put their phone on speaker phone or text for them to increase the safety for both of you.
- **While doing anything that requires your full attention** – like riding a bike, playing a sport, watching children – especially children in a pool!



A Mom's Perspective

Your teen's exploration of how to enter his/her friends' phone numbers in his/her new cellphone or learning the latest texting lingo should be the least of your teen's concerns. S/he will need help in seeing the big picture and realizing where safety and common sense come into play.

As Dr. Sophy stated in my interview with him in it's up to you, the parent, to instill "etiquette, appropriateness, and safety" with your child as s/he begins using a cellphone for the first time. Remember, there are plenty of teens out there more than happy to teach your teen "their" way of communicating in this fascinating new world of technology.

Before giving your teen a phone, ensure you have discussed:

- your expectations of his/her use of the phone
- the times of day your teen is allowed to text and/or make or receive calls
- boundaries of use and what happens if a boundary is crossed
- cellphone manners
- general safety
- driving safety
- sexting – what is it and what to do if your teen receives a sext message

Sexting

Sexting occurs when a person sends a text message to another that contains a message of a sexual nature or a sexually suggestive, nude, or partially nude picture or video. Sexting is gaining popularity amongst adults and teens. LG Mobile Phones conducted a [survey](#) in 2009 asking teens and their parents a number of questions about their cellphones. LG found:



What Teens are Sexting?

- *43% of teens admitted to using some form of sexting*
- *28% of parents admitted to using some form of sexting*
- *22% of teens have received a naked picture – 12% of them forwarded it*
- *41% of teens have received, sent, or forwarded a text that said something sexual*
- *Only 11% of parents thought their teen had ever sexted*

According to a [study](#) on teens the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy conducted in 2008:

- *20% of teens admitted to sending naked or near naked pictures of themselves in text messages*
- *39% of teens admitted to sending sexually suggestive messages to someone (notice 39% in 2008, but 43% in 2009 – this alarming trend is growing)*
- *33% of teen boys and 25% of teen girls said they have had nude/semi-nude pics—originally meant to be private—shared with them*

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Why Teens Sext

When asked why teens are sending sexting messages, the top reasons were:

- *to be “fun or Flirtatious”*
- *to give a “sexy present” to their boyfriend/girlfriend*
- *as a “joke”*
- *to “feel sexy”*
- *they felt pressured*

When asked further about using their cellphones,

- *22% of teens felt that technology helps them to be more forward and aggressive*
- *38% believe that exchanging sexual content makes dating or hooking up with others more likely*
- *29% feel that exchanging sexual messages are “expected” to date or hook up*

Sexting as the Norm?

You can see from these statistics that our teens are feeling tremendous pressure to “fit” in. New social norms are being created in how teens communicate, flirt, and date each other. Passing notes to each other has never been so personal; and yet have such a great possibility of the message becoming widespread in such a short period.

“That so many young people say technology is encouraging an even more casual, hook-up culture is reason for concern, given the high rates of teen and unplanned pregnancy in the United States,” said Marisa Nightingale, Senior Advisor to the Entertainment Media Program at the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy. “Parents should understand that their own notions of what’s public, what’s private, and what’s appropriate, may differ greatly from how teens and young adults define these concepts.” Susan Schulz, Special Projects Editor, Hearst Magazines. (1.)

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Sexting is becoming so prevalent that “1 in 4 teens feel that many people sext and there’s nothing wrong with it.” (LG Survey). It’s safe to assume that if this question is asked of teens in a few years, the number of teens feeling this way will be even higher. What at first seems so shocking minimizes over time as teens receive more sexting messages.

Dangers of Sexting

Sexting can lead to many unanticipated situations:

- **embarrassment** – as the picture/message is sent across town
- **stalkers**- wanting to see more of what they saw in your forwarded sext message
- **isolation** - from others who thought your sext was inappropriate
- **desperation**- as you continue to send sext messages to get someone’s attention
- **depression**- if the person receiving your sext message does not respond
- **date rape** – you finally begin dating someone and they thought you wanted more
- **job loss** – pictures and messages don’t disappear – they are always lurking; Employers are looking for mature responsible workers
- **college admission decline** – colleges are checking applicants online to decrease number of disruptive students
- **cellphone loss**- your parents will likely take your cellphone away if they find out about your sexting
- **unsolicited pictures** sent back from others who “received” your sext
- **charges pressed**- from others who found your sext offensive
- **jail time** – pictures of under-aged children (under the age of 18) are considered child pornography and are illegal

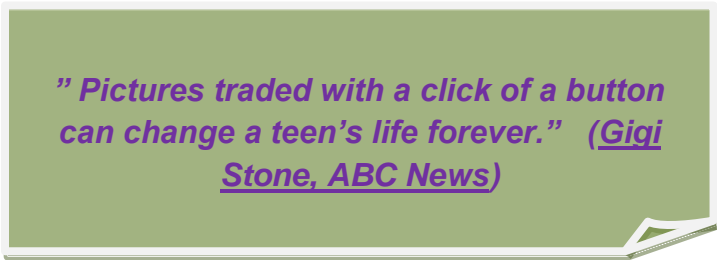


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The list can go on. What might start as a private message or joke between two teens can rapidly spread like wildfire across schools, towns, counties, states, even countries. If a teacher or school administrator sees the sexually explicit picture in a sext, they are required by law to report it to the authorities.

Likewise, as a parent, if you observe anything potential illegal, you have a responsibility to report it to the police. As adults, we know and feel the pressure of doing the right thing. Teens need to be taught and warned about the repercussions of their actions and be reminded that nothing is “private” when sent electronically.

There have been numerous stories where teens have been arrested and/or jailed on charges of child pornography. I read countless articles and news story videos in my research where these teens’ lives have been destroyed as a result of sending a “private” sext message.



“ Pictures traded with a click of a button can change a teen’s life forever.” (Gigi Stone, ABC News)

Important Texting Acronyms to Know

Teens utilize acronyms to

- 1.) make it easier and faster to send a text
- 2.) hide incriminating words from parents or others who might read it

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Here's a few acronyms to give you an idea:

- MOS Mom over Shoulder
- P911 Parent Alert
- RUH Are Your Horney?
- GYPO Get Your Pants Off

The list of acronyms is exhaustive. To help parents decipher text messages better, I scoured the Internet to find some resources. Here are some of the best resources I found:

- [LG's DEXTR – LG's](#) website contains a database of acronyms and allows you to add new ones
- [Top 50 Internet Acronyms Parents Need to Know](#)
- [Top 50 More Acronyms Parents Need to Know](#)[25 More Sexting Acronyms Parents Should Know](#)

Hopefully it's unlikely your teen is using any of these acronyms or type of words in their texts. I am posting them as a reference.

A Mom's Perspective

One action you can take to safely steer your teen through their tempestuous teen years is to regularly check their text messages. Be sure to review all sent and received messages. It's important to note that teens can and will delete messages at times – as they most likely know that you are reviewing their phone periodically.



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Nonetheless it's important for them to see that you are checking their phones so they can be more aware of the use of their phone.

I have heard that it is **possible for a parent to obtain a report from their cellphone company** to see all the texts sent and received from an owned cellphone number. To verify this, I called Verizon. Verizon informed me that this is incorrect. By law, they cannot disclose personal information sent via text. The only information available is the timing of when the text was sent or received and to which phone number. Nonetheless, I've heard from several parents that they threaten their kids with this "report" as a measure to remind them to keep their e-mail's clean.

When you give your child his/her first cellphone it is best to alert them upfront that the cellphone:

- **belongs to the parents** – your teen is just 'borrowing it'
- **must be available** for spot checks by the parents
- **might be used as "evidence"** to ensure message offenders do not repeat inappropriate behavior
- **must not be "locked"** without giving the passcode to the parents first

Some parents believe that checking their teen's cellphone is an invasion of privacy or is not needed because their teen is a good kid. I disagree. Looking at the statistics above, it is more than likely that our children will receive sexting messages. Even "good" kids can be led astray from peer pressure.

Based on the dangers discussed, there's too much at risk to NOT check your teen's phone. It's imperative that parents talk to their teens about the risks and consequences of their actions. Decisions to send or forward a sext message today can haunt your teen many years in the future.

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Teach your teen to treat others with respect and integrity while in person, on the phone, or through text messages – the medium should not matter. Doing so will keep your teen out of trouble and possible humiliation.

It is my hope that this series on Teens and Cellphones has at least provided you with some food for thought, if not a springboard in discussing some of these tips with your teen. Remember, our children are watching everything we do. We are the best examples on how act responsibly.

Resources

- WellConnectedMom.com – Please consider this as your resource for keeping up with technology and harnessing it to make your life more efficient, effective, and fun!
- TheWellConnectedHome.com – This site simplifies and demystifies technology for homeowners.



References Used

- (1.) http://www.thenationalcampaign.org/sextech/PDF/SexTech_PressReleaseFIN.pdf