

Parent Tip Sheet: Introducing a Cell Phone

A New Tool, A New Chapter

Giving your child a cell phone? It's a big moment. It opens doors to connection and independence but also comes with new responsibilities. You can make this a positive experience with clear guidelines and expectations.

WHY INTRODUCE A CELL PHONE?



CONNECTION & SAFETY

Staying in touch with you and trusted friends, especially when away from home.



LEARNING & CREATIVITY

Accessing educational resources and tools for photography, video editing, etc.



DEVELOPING INDEPENDENCE

Managing their own communication and learning responsibility.

WHEN TO INTRODUCE A CELL PHONE

There is no “magic age” to introduce a cell phone. It depends on your child's maturity, their needs and your family's values.

- **Consider needs:** Is it for safety (public transit, after-school activities), communication, or social connection? The answer can guide your decision on when to introduce a phone.
- **Maturity matters:** Can they handle the responsibility of caring for the device and using it respectfully? If you are unsure, consider a basic phone with limited features to start.

STEPS FOR A PRACTICAL INTRODUCTION

1 SETTING CLEAR EXPECTATIONS (BEFORE INTRODUCING IT)

Explain that a cell phone is a privilege, not a right. Create usage guidelines together and consider a contract that you and your child sign with information like:

- Time limits and phone-free zones (dinner, bedrooms at night).
- Respectful online communication and contact rules.
- Safe app and website downloads.
- Not sharing personal information, photos or location with strangers.

2 EXPLORE TOGETHER

In the beginning, explore the phone together. This isn't about distrust; it's about learning. Set up parental controls and review their contacts together, so you both understand how it works.



3 MODEL GOOD BEHAVIOR

Demonstrate how you use your phone responsibly (e.g., taking breaks, avoiding oversharing, respectful interactions, etc.). This will help them learn good habits.

4 TEACH SAFE COMMUNICATION

Explain that some text messages can be tricky and easily misunderstood. Discuss how to encourage clear and respectful messaging. Teach them how to spot online/messaging scams and what to do. Remind them not to send inappropriate photos or messages, as these can have lasting consequences. If anything feels unsafe or uncomfortable, make sure your child knows they can talk to you openly and without judgment.

5 BALANCE ONLINE/OFFLINE

Explain that phones are great but experiences beyond the screen are important too. Help them find hobbies and activities they enjoy away from the screen.

7 LEARNING FROM MISTAKES

Acknowledge that everyone makes mistakes. If something happens, talk about it together. Use it as a learning opportunity.

9 DISCUSS AI AND MISINFORMATION

Explain how artificial intelligence can create realistic-looking fake content (images, videos, text) on phone apps and social media. Teach them to think critically about sources and verify information before sharing from their phone.

6 GRADUAL FREEDOM

As they demonstrate responsible behavior, gradually give them more freedom. This is about building trust, step by step.

8 ONGOING DIALOGUE

The online world and technology change fast. Keep talking about it so you can learn and adapt together. Create an environment where they feel supported and confident in sharing their experiences.

10 ESTABLISH EMERGENCY PROTOCOLS

Create a plan for emergencies related to their phone use. Teach your child what to do if they encounter cyberbullying, online exploitation, or any situation that makes them feel unsafe through their phone. Have a list of trusted contacts and resources readily available on the phone, including parents' numbers and other close adults, school contact information, emergency services and additional supports such as Kids Help Phone (24/7 support line).

A critical part of engaging youth in technology is ensuring they have the knowledge and skills to be responsible and empowered online. Actua's Cyber Smart Education Project empowers youth to explore, create and connect responsibly online. Visit actua.ca for additional information and resources on keeping youth safe online.