

Parent Tech 101
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Today Contributor

Cell Phone Savvy:

Whether you're considering a first cell phone for your tween or teen or endeavoring to limit various functions on your child's already existing cell phone it's important for parents to understand the various controls and technologies available today.

The decision to get your child's first cell phone usually occurs when you are badgered by your kid, who insists that "everyone" has one. Whether that's accurate or not is probably of little interest to your child, but it's their best selling point! Often parents recognize the safety features of the child carrying a cell phone, including the ability to communicate easily with parents by voice or text messaging. Convenience is also a large factor when considering this rite of passage to the teen years—knowing where in the mall to meet your child, or getting the head's up that soccer practice has been delayed are invaluable bits of information that lead to efficiency, convenience and safety for both you and your child.

But, what about the downsides to kid cell phone usage? Well...there are plenty of issues to consider, and the following tips should be of help in deciding what plans are best for your kids and your family in general. When thinking about getting your child's first phone consider having the child initially use your cell phone for certain functions where you'll need to know the time and place for pick up, or in case of an emergency. With reduced numbers of pay phones available, it's all about communication, and a cell phone can come in handy. In addition, kids can feel isolated without easy access to their parents.

If the youngster handles using your cell phone appropriately (uses it only to contact necessary adults) consider allowing the child to have their own phone with a small amount of voice minutes or text capability each month. Most cell phone providers offer family plans where both the child and the parent are notified when the allotted number of minutes or texts are approaching and some even disallow usage when the limit has been met. This encourages the child to check the number of minutes or texts used throughout the month and teaches budgeting.

Think about whether you'll allow both voice and text communication and understand how this can be allotted by parental controls. Determine whether your child's cell phone will have video, picture or Internet availability in addition to voice and text communication. Much of this depends upon the cell phone purchased as well as the Parental Controls that you set up for each child's individual cell phone.

When you've decided to make the move to purchasing a cell phone for your kid communicate the purpose of doing so. For you it's probably all about safety and convenience. For the kid it's most likely social networking and yakking with their

friends. Let your child know that the phone is a privilege as well as a responsibility and that it *belongs to you*. The child can use it as long as the house cell phone rules are abided by.

With your child practice voice messaging and text messaging. Both of you need to become adept at these techniques and your child need to see that you understand how to check his or her texts, the monthly billing online and number of minutes used, at what time of day the phone is being used and also who they are communicating with. If the Internet is available on your child's phone surf the web together and agree upon the level of parental control that will be necessary for your child's age and maturity level. And, don't be afraid to set boundaries. Remember—you most likely own the phone and therefore have the right and the responsibility to monitor voice, text, picture, video as well as Internet usage.

So, what are some of the Parental Control available? Well, this depends upon the cell phone carrier and the usage plan that you select. In general some type of Family Plan is necessary for parental controls, but not always. In addition, there are private guardian software programs that can be purchased separately from your specific cell phone provider plans that may sync with your phones.

Parental Controls (set up by the parent on either the parent's cell phone or computer and password protected so that the child cannot change the levels). All cellular providers have various levels and types of parental controls, and can be found at:

- **AT&T:** <http://www.wireless.att.com/learn/articles-resources/parental-controls/smart-limits.jsp>
- **Sprint:** http://search.sprint.com/inquirapp/ui.jsp?ui_mode=question&charset=iso-8859-1&language=en-US&user.status=prospect&user.site=UHP&question_box=parental+controls
- **T-Mobile:** http://www.t-mobile.com/shop/addons/services/information.aspx?PAsset=FamilyWireless&tp=Svc_Tab_FW101ProtectYourKids
- **Check out www.verizonwireless.com/parentalcontrols for perhaps the greatest number of parental guardian features, many described below in detail.**

Content filters (free on most carriers, but these are listed by Verizon): These allow parents to set filters for what multimedia content their children can download to their cell phones. The choices are:

- C7+ which is recommended for ages 7 and older (it's like TV-G with little or no violence, G-rated movies and no explicit rated songs).
- T13 is for ages 13 and older, and there is some explicit language and sexual innuendo. This is similar to TV-PG, PG-13 rated movies with no explicit rated songs.

- YA 17+ has content recommended for ages 17 and older. This may include content similar to TV-MA, R-rated movies and some explicit rated songs. Crude language and graphic violence, sexual situations and drug abuse may be seen or heard at this level.

Usage Controls (small monthly charge on most carriers): This puts the parent in charge of the child's cell phone usage and is password protected.

- Usage allowance: the number of minutes or text messages allowed during a billing cycle.
- Time restrictions: limits usage during a certain time of day or day of week (for instance during school, or after a set time at night). Parents can limit this to texting only, voice only, or both.
- Blocked numbers: depending upon the plan, up to 20 numbers can be restricted from calling or texting your child at all times. Your kid cannot contact these phone numbers also.
- Allowed (or trusted) numbers: always available in and out regardless of other restrictions (for instance—time of day restriction) and are usually calls to 911 or allowed adults or family members.

These restrictions also reduce the risk of unexpected charges on your wireless account for downloads, ring tones, videos, etc.

On the parent's account or computer the adults can set up a monthly allowance for text, picture, video and voice messages. When the threshold is met (or 15 minutes or 15 messages prior to that) a free text message will be sent to both the child's and the parent's cell phones. It should be noted that dialing 911 is never limited or restricted, nor are allowed or trusted numbers. Usage controls and content filters can be set differently for your various kids. It's also possible on certain family plans to send one text message to all of the family members (what time will everyone be home for dinner?), so that multiple messages do not need to be sent.

Another interesting feature that is available from Verizon is called *Chaperone*.

Details can be found at:

http://products.vzw.com/index.aspx?id=fnd_chaperone

This is a very interesting feature that helps to put the parent's mind at ease by knowing where the child's phone is, and presumably the kid is with the phone!

Some of the features include:

- Family Locator—used to locate the child's phone from the parent's cell phone or computer (based on a GPS system built into the child's cell phone).
- Child Zone—allows the parent to construct zones or vicinities that the child is allowed to be within. When the child leaves an allowed zone the parent's phone will be notified by a text message.
- The system is transparent, meaning that the child will be alerted for the Family Locator that the parent is checking upon the whereabouts of the

youngster. This program costs an extra \$9.99 a month, but can lead to a great deal of peace of mind!

Now, a word about cell phone usage and courtesy, safety and common sense. Not only do tweens and teens need to address these issues, but so do adults! No one likes to overhear others conversations in theaters, restaurants or on public transportation. And, there are safety issues involved with talking in public. I suggest that you and your child check out the Be Sensible, Be Safe and Be Courteous site at AT&T:

<http://www.wireless.att.com/learn/articles-resources/be-sensible.jsp>

Parent Tech for Computer Usage:

Now that we have some tips and tech ideas for safe cell phone usage, what about parent controls for your child's use of the Internet? All Internet providers offer various levels of parental controls, some more stringent than others. For instance, AOL offers parental controls for Internet Access List, Program Controls, On/Off Controls, Activity Reports, Recent Programs accessed, and many other helpful tools <http://parentalcontrols.aol.com/>. It would be wise to check out the various Web Guards or Parental Controls found at your Internet provider's site. Most are free of charge, and just take a few minutes of your time to set up the levels of usage and filters for each of your children. All of this can be password protected so that the kids cannot change your settings. And, if each child is using their own password, you can change the level of parental control for each of the children.

Also, check out the Thinkfinity site at <http://www.thinkfinity.org/home.aspx>. This lists various online safety resources to help kids protect themselves and their identity. Topics range from selecting a safe digital name (persona) for use online, to articles, downloads and tools that will show you and other family members how to make the Internet a safe, fun place to be. Considering MySpace or Facebook issues for your children? Check out <http://www.common sense media.org/facebook-parents>. It's a great resource with tips for social media "friending", video chatting and general digital literacy. And, take a look at common sense media's Digital Citizenship site: <http://www.common sense media.org/digital-citizenship>. Topics include sexting, cyberbullying, YouTube and many other areas of the web that your children are bound to run into.

And, there are software programs that you can purchase that will work with many Internet Provider plans. PGKey (www.pgkey.com/FAQ.aspx) is one such program. They note that "PG Key is a new, simple to use, all in one solution that:

- Puts parents in control. It allows parents to control when their kids use the computer—and for how long. Remove the key and the computer can't be used. Hours can be set on PG Key much like a cell phone.
- Engages Safe Search content filtering. The approach of "white list" site blocking is too restrictive and normally becomes so inconvenient and frustrating that parents disable it—PG Key Safe Search content filtering allows the freedom to search the web, but prevents most of the unwanted and dangerous content from

- showing up. Parents also have the ability to block certain websites from showing up.
- **Creates Accountability.** Once kids know that their parents are no longer excluded from their “online lives” their behavior changes...PG Key implements 10 parental control and notification features so that kids know they need to behave like they would in any other part of their life—where there are consequences to inappropriate behavior.”

As you can see, the savvy, tech-smart parent can have quite a say as to how the child is using technology, and hopefully this will lead to a smart, safe experience. Short of putting a locator chip in the kid’s arm, cell phones now have some of the best capabilities of adding location information, communication and safety to your child’s ever expanding world. Social networking online can be safe and fun, but only if the parent is involved and employing parental controls, keeping the computer in a “public” place in the home, and employing rules of courtesy and safety.