

## Cell Phones for Middle Schoolers

A parent recently asked me when is the right time to get a cell phone for your middle schooler. Why doesn't the Bible tell us how to handle these things!!

Let's face it – they live and die by the things BUT, they are not all fun and games. There is a lot of trouble out there if your teen is not careful and not prepared. I personally feel (I emphasize personally) that the right time is when your middle schooler needs it because (1) they are going places without you or (2) you feel they are mature enough to handle it. You have to decide the right time for you.

Now, let's be clear – mature is based on their level – not yours. For me (again PERSONALLY), mature means they generally act in a responsible manner – they are honest with you (mostly); they maintain their school work and personal commitments; and they are respectful of other people.

The reason I set these three criteria out is that without honesty, you cannot have trust, and without trust, I am not getting you a cell phone that allows you to get into all kinds of harmless (and not so harmless) mischief. If they are maintaining their school work, they are showing they can be responsible and balance demands/distractions – and a cell phone brings LOTS of distractions. Finally, if they can show they are respectful of people, then they are less likely to engage in the kind of conduct that makes others (and themselves) a target for bullying and misbehavior.

Before you get your middle schooler a phone (or if they already have one, in which case the conversation is tougher) you need to set out the rules of the game. There are several good parent's contracts for cell phones on the internet. Get one and go through it. Have your teen and you discuss it and sign it. It is okay for you to sign one too, so long as it does not limit your rights to check the phone and see what is going on. Then BOTH OF YOU must honor it – which means you have to give them the trust and respect they can earn, but you also must show you will monitor it to keep your teen honest.

Further, before getting a cell phone, talk about how your treatment of others reflects back on you. Also, no one who bullies another can be prepared for the hell that can come back to them when someone reports their conduct to the police. The days of telling the teacher are long gone; people call the police first; and once you send something out (photo or text) it is out of your control forever. Your teen needs to know that what they say and do with that cell phone LASTS FOREVER – that means next week; next month; college applications; job application, etc., and that society has become a lot less tolerant for mistreating others via cell phones. Anyone who tells you that the image/text/etc is "gone" in 5 minutes or less knows nothing about how the systems work. As a criminal prosecutor, I can tell you that if you sent it, the government can find it and trace it back to you. What seems like a funny picture of your butt today will not be so funny when it shows up on someone else's snapchat post.

This is an important moment to establish an "adult" relationship with your teen – if you treat them with trust and respect, you will get it in return. There are important lessons to learn from a cell phone – and you should be teaching them – not their friends.