

Social Media

Presenting Problem:

A participating PCP emailed a consultation request to WI CPCP, regarding a 12-year-old female patient who is generally healthy and is being treated for ADHD, which is going well. The patient's parents ask whether it is advisable for their daughter to receive her first cell phone. They feel it would be helpful for communicating with her but aren't sure "if she's old enough yet." The PCP requests advice on how to proceed.

Consultant's Response:

The decision about when to give a child their first phone is ideally based on the child's level of maturity and responsibility, rather than just their age. Many children are ready for a phone at an average age of 12 or 13. They probably stay home alone, walk to friends' houses by themselves, or attend after-school activities around the ages of 12–13. A cell phone can be very helpful for emergencies and pick-up requests. However, the benefits need to be balanced with potential downfalls, such as overuse and exposure to inappropriate content.

Signs that the child might not be ready for a phone:

- The child can't keep track of their things.
- The child is already distracted by screens.
- The child is already getting bullied or being a bully.

Addressing potential risks:

- Limit screen time from day one:
 - Require the phone to be charged overnight. Keep the charger in the kitchen (or anywhere but the child's bedroom).
 - Create "phone-free zones."
 - Designate "phone-free times."
 - Lead by example.
- Use parental controls:
 - For younger kids, start with a device—like a [kid's smartwatch](#)—that gives the parent full control over their contact list.
 - For kids aged 13 and up, use a parental control app that allows monitoring of the child's social media use.
 - Ex: The parental control tool, such as *Bark*, monitors a child's activity on social networks, *YouTube*, email, and text messages. It filters for signs of harmful content, including sexual material, threats of violence, depression, suicidal ideation, and bullying. Parents get email and text alerts if there is something concerning in the child's online activity. It can also be used to limit screen time and block individual websites.
 - Screen Time is another tool that allows parents to set time limits on daily screen time and block out periods when screens are not to be used, and it includes categories of sites and individual URLs.

- Set up a “phone contract”:
 - This is a formal written agreement between the parent and child that covers expectations, responsibilities, and consequences. It can list all the ground rules about screen time, passwords, message content, internet usage, parental surveillance, and even the monthly bill.

Teaching Points:

Children are legally allowed on social media by age 13, which can open the door for exposure to inappropriate content as well as cyberbullying from peers and online strangers alike. Some companion apps, like the video editor *Zoomerang*, include a dangerous location-tracking feature.

The most popular social media apps among today’s kids are *YouTube*, *Snapchat*, *TikTok*, and *Instagram*. Here’s why some parents find them concerning:

- *YouTube* videos aren’t screened before publication, allowing kids to find plenty of inappropriate content.
- *Snapchat* content disappears after 24 hours. Some kids (and predators) take advantage of this by sharing explicit photos or videos.
- *TikTok* has very loose content guidelines, so kids may run into offensive or explicit content.
- Research shows *Instagram* use worsens body image and mental health issues among young girls.

The [Safewise](#) website lists key features of parental control apps:

- [Content filtering](#)
- [Message monitoring](#)
- [App approvals and monitoring](#)
- [Location tracking and geofencing](#)
- [Screen time management](#)
- [Contact management and call history](#)
- [Uninstall protection](#)
- [Parent dashboards and alerts](#)

Resources:

[Social Media and Teens](#) a quick one-pager for parents, regarding social media and kids
[Get familiar with social media safety](#) a comprehensive resource which includes social media information and advice for parents based on the age of the child as well as guidance on setting controls on phones, etc.

References:

[What Age Should Kids Get a Phone?](#)
[Guide to Parental Controls](#)
[When Should You Get Your Kid a Phone? It's not just a question of the right age](#)