

Teens and Media Use: Cell Phones—What's the Plan?¹

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Cell phones have revolutionized the way people interact and communicate. It seems like almost everyone has one. It has even gotten to the point that people are canceling their land-line phone services and only using cell phones. However, cell phones can be quite expensive, and this is part of the reason they have become a concern for budgeting. It is advised that you shop around and compare prices to find the cell phone and plan that best fits your needs. There are many plans, options, and providers available. Do your research to make a sound and informed decision.

Given the increasing integration cell phones are playing in our lives, finding the right phone and the right service provider is an important issue for parents and teens. Phones today have more and more features. Features such as texting, talking, and tweeting are now all a part of the adolescent experience. This is an excellent opportunity for families to discuss these issues. Parents can establish ground rules and a budget. Teens can think about the things they want versus the things they need on a phone. So where do families begin the dialogue?

The Phone

Start by identifying what your teen wants or needs in a cell phone, and define your own terms, too. According to an AT&T survey administered in LA and NY, 94% of parents agree that cellular phones are good for teens. Many parents want to know that they can call

their teen at any time to make sure they are safe and okay. Currently, 25% of cell phone revenues come from teenagers with 1/3 of all teen aged people carrying cell phones in the US.

There are some benefits to teens having cell phones:

- Young people can learn valuable lessons in responsibility, accountability, financial management, and understanding of bills and contract guidelines. In order to do this though, it is important to speak to your teens up front and set out rules before they receive their cell phones. Since cell phones can be costly, you may decide to have your child pay for his/her own cell phone, or contribute in some way to the costs, particularly where overages or specific features are concerned. The most common features are listed in Table 1.
- Most teens want high-tech cell phones capable of Web browsing and text/instant messaging plus cameras for picture messaging, but these may all be additional ongoing costs to your plans. Also, consider the effects that cell phones may have on your teen's life. Keep in mind, too, the potential dangers of cell phone use, such as being on the phone while driving, which can be the cause for increased accidents. Talk to your teen about boundaries and phone use privileges; make sure to mention consequences for overstepping those boundaries as well.

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Table 1. Some common phone features

Feature	What is it for?
QWERTY Keyboard	Unlike traditional phones with three letters per number key, QWERTY keyboards have full computer-type keyboards with letters ordered in the same way as a standard computer or typewriter keyboard. As with a standard keyboard, the first six letters from left to right are <i>Q-W-E-R-T-Y</i> . The layout of QWERTY keyboards generally allows for faster typing/texting.
Touch Screen	This allows you to navigate through cell phone options and applications by touching icons on your screen instead of using the directional keys on your keypad.
MP3 Player	This allows you to upload and play music files (those with filename extension <i>.mp3</i>) on your cell phone.
Internet (Broadband access)	This allows you to browse the Internet, use Internet enabled programs, and check email on your cell phone.
Global Positioning System (GPS)	This allows you get turn-by-turn directions from one place to another on your cell phone. Some phones allow someone to find the phone's location on an online map using its GPS.
Calendar	This allows you to enter and keep track of appointments.
Bluetooth	Bluetooth allows you to exchange data wirelessly over short distances between your phone and other devices.
Camera and Camcorder	These allow you to take still photos and record videos on your phone.
Microsoft® Windows and Office	This means that the phone operates using Windows Mobile®, which is attractive to people who may want to have more communication between their phone and their PCS. These will often synchronize information by USB connection, Internet, or Bluetooth. This often means that documents, spreadsheets and presentations can be viewed and edited on the phone.
Smartphone	These may use a different operating system than Windows® phones but still allow for synchronizing between the phone and one's computer. A common brand is Palm®. By synchronizing online or with a computer, it will provide the ability to backup information stored on your phone.
Push Mail	This feature allows users to get email sent through to their phone. This is most commonly associated with BlackBerry® devices but many smartphones have this feature to help users stay in touch.
Add-on Applications	In addition to the applications described above, some phones allow users to add additional applications. Examples are numerous and include anything from games to scanner capabilities.

The Plan

Suggestions to help you choose the right plan are to:

- assess your **needs**,
- think about the **features** that you may want,
- and compare **prices** and different plans, as well as looking at other options provided by various cell phone providers.

When choosing a cell phone carrier and plan, make sure to consider contract terms and limitations, charges, and costs. Some companies may offer you a free phone in exchange for signing a 2-year contract with them. Ask key questions:

- What are the basic charges?
- What are the charges for texting and data?
- How many minutes are allotted under each plan?
- What are the additional charges for various features?
- What are the charges for going over the minutes or text messages covered in your plan?

You should know the terms and conditions for the following items:

- How many minutes you have on your plan and for what services
- When your free nights and weekends begin and end
- Rollover minutes
- Whether you can call certain people for unlimited minutes (e.g. *mobile-to-mobile*, *my 5*, etc.)

Some additional **basic plan** terminology to consider includes the following plan types:

- **Stand-Alone Plan:** allows for an individual cell phone account
- **Companion Plan:** allows more than one person to share the plan, such as sharing the minutes
- **Local Unlimited:** includes unlimited local and incoming calls, and charges for long distance calls
- **Prepaid Plan:** you pay for only a certain amount of minutes so that you can use minutes up until they run out

Whatever phone you decide on, your plan should reflect the features available on the phone. For example, if your phone has a keyboard for texting or email, you want to be sure your plan has a good rate for these uses. Otherwise your charges could be much higher than anticipated when the statement comes each month. Likewise, if your phone has camera features you may want a plan that allows you to send pictures or videos to others.

The two charts (Tables 2 and 3) in the next section will help you organize your thoughts and preferences regarding cell phone features and cell plans. Parents and teens should discuss the results of these charts and use this information when visiting the store or shopping online.

Cell Phone Features and Plans Checklists

Next to each feature in Tables 2 and 3, check if you *need it*, *want it*, or *neither*. Then compare your checklist to the plans and phones offered by different providers to decide which option is best for you.

Table 2. Cell phone features - a checklist

Phone Features	Need It	Want It	Neither
QWERTY Key Board			
Color Screen			
Touch Screen			
MP3 Capabilities			
Internet Capabilities			
GPS Capabilities			
Streaming Video Capabilities			
Calendar			
Bluetooth			
Microsoft® Windows Capabilities			
Push Mail			
Add on Applications			
Other:			

Table 3. Cell phone plans - a checklist

Plan Features	Need It	Want It	Neither
Multiple people on one plan			
Unlimited anytime minutes *If "neither" figure out how many minutes you will need and write the number here: _____			
Unlimited night and weekend minutes			
Unlimited mobile-to-mobile minutes *Usually applicable with companion plans			
Unlimited Text Messages *If "neither" estimate the number of text messages you will need per month and write the number here: _____			
Unlimited minutes to specific phone numbers of your choice *sometimes referred to as "Friends Plans"			
Rollover Minutes			
Data Usage (Internet, email, etc.)			
Free long distance			
Free voicemail			
Other:			

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