



August 15, 2009

SHORTCUTS

New Worries About Children With Cellphones

By ALINA TUGEND

THREE years ago, when my older son, Ben, was entering middle school, I wrote a column recounting a debate with my husband about getting him a cellphone. Was he too young? Were we being overly indulgent? How would we hold out against his younger brother, Gabriel, who immediately began badgering for his own phone?

Now Ben is entering high school; his brother is going into middle school. Gabriel has had his own cellphone since he was 9 and began walking to and from school by himself. And our past worries seem so quaint.

Back then, I wasn't worried about inappropriate downloads. Or questionable sales techniques aimed at my preteenager. Or excessive texting (I'm not even going to touch "sexting"). Or the sheer annoyance of a cellphone clutched in my sons' hands like a security blanket.

Now, about half of American children 12 years and older have cellphones, according to Christopher Collins, a senior analyst for consumer research at the Yankee Group, a research firm. And that has spawned all sorts of problems, like questions about etiquette and costly scams.

For example, a while back, we stumbled upon a surprise \$19.99 charge on our [Verizon](#) Wireless bill. It turned out that Ben had accidentally bought a joke-a-day for his cellphone. He thought he had taken advantage of a free offer.

The trouble is, it's not always clear where the offer is coming from. Mike Wehrs, president of the trade group Mobile Marketing Association, explained that there were different ways to buy a service, like a ring tone, screensaver, service or game for your cellphone.

One is to purchase directly from your phone carrier, and that is pretty safe, he said. The top carriers tend to follow his organization's guidelines, which require that consumers be asked twice if they want to buy the service, told how much it will cost, whether it is a one-time fee or a monthly charge and how to opt out.

But then there are third-party providers, also known as "off-deck," which are apparently what Ben used. These are companies that are not associated with our cellphone server. Therefore they may be less forthcoming, let us say, in explaining charges. They can also be much more difficult to contact with questions or complaints.

It's not so much that some of these shady companies are increasing, but there has been a tremendous growth in the last year in the number of sophisticated phones with all sorts of applications that "can be exploited by people operating in an illegal or deceptive way," Mr. Wehrs said.

He said his association was working with the Federal Trade Commission and other organizations to crack down on such companies. A nonprofit group, the Utility [Consumers' Action Network \(ucan.org\)](http://ucan.org), has also brought pressure on carriers to be more responsive to such problems.

Art Neill, a lawyer with the group, said wireless carriers, which often benefit from these transactions, should be held responsible for making sure customers did not have unauthorized charges on their phone bills. "If you have a charge on your phone bill you didn't authorize, the company should be willing to credit you, and many times it is legally required to do so," he said.

When we called Verizon Wireless to complain about Ben's purchase, the company agreed to take it off our bill and told us how to block the number. Debra Lewis, a spokeswoman for Verizon Wireless, said that each situation was looked at case by case, "but we try to work with the customer."

Many parents — and I include myself in this category — keep a (somewhat) careful eye on television, computer and video game use. But we didn't really take into account cellphones, since at least until recently, phones were intended, well, pretty much for calling people.

But now owning a good cellphone — and many children have more sophisticated phones than their parents — is like having a computer, said Dr. Regina M. Milteer, a pediatrician in Fairfax, Va., and member of the Academy of American Pediatrics [council on communication and media](#).

The big question she hears from parents of her patients, she said, is how to control cellphone use. Besides the old-fashioned way ("if we catch you using your cellphone in bed one more time, you'll lose it!") most cellphone companies now offer some sort of parental control for about \$5 a month.

For example, [AT&T](#) has its Smart Limits option which, among other things, allows parents to block numbers and Web sites, limit purchases like ring tones, games and graphics to a certain dollar amount, and establish times of day that the phone can be used for mobile Web browsing, texting and outbound calls.

"The best thing parents can do is educate, educate, educate," Dr. Milteer said. "They also need to set limits." One suggestion, she said, is putting a basket out where children place their phones upon arriving home.

"Then they can't go in their room and text their friends," she said. If they need to contact them, they can use the house's landline.

Not only is constant texting distracting and unnecessary, she said, but "you have to wonder if it interferes with developing some social skills at some point."

Parents also complain to her about their children texting under their covers at night.

"Take it away," Dr. Milteer said. "Let them know there are rules. There comes a time when parents have to be parents."

We've all heard that driving and texting is dangerous, but Dr. Milteer warned that pedestrian accidents have occurred because children were texting as they crossed the street and were not aware of their surroundings. And even though it may not be as hazardous to use cellphones while sitting at the dinner table or mingling with friends, it is just plain rude.

My sons aren't marathon texters, but it is their preferred form of communication with their friends. I was curious as to why that is.

"It's just easier," they told me. There's no going through parents or siblings, no answering machines. Also, they're so used to instant gratification that letting the phone ring and talking is considered too onerous.

Now don't get me wrong. I don't want to ban cellphones — they often come in handy. And the reality is, depriving my children of their phones now would be akin to my parents cutting me off of our old landline back when I was a teenager, although even then we had limits, like no calls after 9 p.m. Rather, parents have to be on top of how that cellphone is being used. "When you hand a phone to a kid, you have to affirmatively take control," Mr. Neill said.

We have more or less trained our sons, but every once in a while there's a slip-up. And I think I've found a solution. Next time I observe my children overly focused on their cells, I'll send them a text message: Put the phone away.

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