



PARENT PLUS

INFORMATION FROM YOUR PEDIATRICIAN

Cell phones can be dangerously distracting

Safety often is on parents' minds when they buy their children their first cell phone. The gadgets allow children to stay connected and report their activities and whereabouts.

A new study, however, shows that cell phones pose a dangerous distraction to preadolescent phone users.

Published in the February issue of *Pediatrics*, the study examined the behavior of preadolescents in simulated virtual street-crossing scenarios, with and without a cell phone. Results indicated that children with cell phones were more likely to be struck (remember, this was a *virtual* environment) and slower in their response times to oncoming traffic.

"Not only are we increasing their physical danger, because children are distracted and don't pay attention because they're busy texting and playing games and listening to music on their cell phones, we're also decreasing the time that they can otherwise use to directly interact with their peers ... they lose the ability to actually use their social skills with other people," said Regina Milteer, M.D., FAAP, a member of the American Academy of Pediatrics' Council on Communications and Media.

Among the consequences of an

increasingly cell phone-dependent young generation are:

- failure to heed traffic laws and physical surroundings;
- interruption to schoolwork;
- less meaningful family time; and
- uncharacteristic brazenness. Many youths say things via text message that they wouldn't dream of saying in person.

The earliest that children should have cell phones, Dr. Milteer said, is around 11 or 12 years of age.

To minimize an early attachment to cell phones in your child, here are some rules to follow:

- Cell phones should not be used during the school day, except in emergency situations.
- Cell phones should never be used when children are in parking lots, crossing the street or driving.



- Cell phone use should be monitored in the evenings, when children should be engaging in family time or completing schoolwork.

Short of becoming Big Brother, there are effective ways to supervise your child's cell phone use. Bare-bones, prepaid phones are a good option. They allot only a certain number of minutes, keeping conversations short and sweet: "Practice ends at 7" or "I'm on my way home."

Dr. Milteer also encourages parents to be the "keepers of the cell phones," collecting them as kids get home from school and reissuing them for appropriate use.

— Caitlin O. Smith