

Cell Phones and Children

by Dr. Cheryl McElhany

Cell Phones.....what did we ever do without them? Well, many of us can remember very well, what we did without them. Everyone had a land line phone, and even a few of my more affluent friends had an additional line or two, which their parents designated as a business line or the "children's line". And this was in the days before "call waiting", so if my friend was talking on the phone to another one of my friends when I tried to call her, I got a "busy signal". Ugh! I used to hate those busy signals, but oh, how I long for the day of busy signals, sometimes. Busy signals really were very wise additions to our telecommunications systems back 30 years ago. They basically let the caller know I was busy talking to someone else, and they needed to wait until I was finished. The caller did not even have the option of interrupting my call by sending a "call waiting" signal. And the caller certainly never had the luxury of going to my "voice mail" and leaving me a lengthy, sometimes incoherent message adding to many others that would take me all day to get through with return calls. Now granted, I can elect to *not* have "call waiting" notices or voice mail, but most people with children or businesses feel these options are very necessary, and they need to know if urgent calls are coming in. Also, most callers expect people to have such options as call waiting with "caller I.D." so it is pretty hard to ignore an incoming caller. Before you know it, you become a pseudo switchboard operator, asking one friend to hold, while you acknowledge an incoming caller, and put that

person on hold, or say you will call him back, etc. It is exhausting!

Then add in cell phones to the tele-communications process, and you have suddenly gone "mobile". Yikes! You can run, but you cannot hide. No answer at your home, and voila! , your cell phone begins its disco interlude, and your communications continue on the way to the gym, or store, etc. The brain truly gets no rest during your waking hours, let's face it. Now this might be fine for adults, but the next dilemma to consider is..... Is this good for kids? Well, you already know what I am going to say. Of course it isn't. A child's brain is still developing until around the age of 20 actually, with most of the growth taking place in early childhood through the teen years, thus, they are called children. This recent trend to segment childhood into elementary age, pre-teens, and teenagers might be fine for fashion, but not for more factual and serious concerns such as health and developmental practices. The research is pretty clear about what is really important for healthy child development, such as, appropriate amounts of rest, play and exercise, nutrition, and guided academics. And, these guidelines do not change all that much as a child moves from elementary age to teenage years. Unfortunately, many children live in homes where good developmental practices are not in place, or not maintained as the kids grow older. For example, we see far less obese elementary children than are seen in middle and high school due mainly to the lack of exercise and poor eating habits that plague the middle and high school children. Children at the elementary age love to go outside and play and look forward to P.E. each day. Way too many children in middle and high schools show just

the opposite interest in physical activity, and rarely eat healthy foods.

So, what does this all have to do with cell phones, you might be asking? Well a cell phone is a mobile communication device. It can also be a major distraction to one's focus on reading, listening to a teacher, completing an assignment, or getting adequate exercise and eating a proper meal. And, add in that a cell phone is also a social communication device which is a very strong attraction piece, it has no business with a child at school or other activity which requires them to focus, think, and produce. It is just too enticing, too easy to pull them astray, and too hard for them to resist. Parents need to be good parents, and just say....no! "Oh, but I need my child to have a cell phone for emergencies, or so I will know where they are all the time," say a lot of parents. Well, to those parents, I say.... Be a good, objective parent, and understand, you do not give kids a piece of candy and tell them not to eat it until after school. That is setting them up for failure. I encourage parents to say to their child, *"I know you feel having a cell phone is important, and you think all the other kids have one, but that is not totally true, and you are in school to focus on learning all your academic subjects and to complete all your assignments with good quality and accuracy. A cell phone is something that will interrupt your focus and get you into trouble at school, so....., **no**, you will not have a cell phone."* And, if that child is a teenager, and is trustworthy, honest, and obeys all your other home and school rules, you might consider allowing a cell phone on special occasions, like extracurricular activities or weekend outings, use of the car, etc., but make it really clear, the phone will be taken back for a long, long time, if not used according to your rules. If your

teenager is like most teenagers, they are not perfect, and they really do not need a cell phone. So, it should be viewed as a privilege, and given only if earned and cherished. Even though children, especially teenagers, often act like they are entitled to most things, it is important for parents to make them understand that most everything is a privilege, and needs to be earned and cherished or it goes away.