

Dear parents

On Thursday night we addressed a topic that is bound to become one of the most talked about subjects in years to come, namely children and cell phones. It has come under our attention that cell phone users are becoming younger and younger every year with US statistics indicating that of the children ages 6 to 11, 20% own a cell phone – up from the 11.9% found in 2005. One of the most dramatic increases seen in the study was from 10 to 11 year old range with over 80.5% owning. It was also indicated that children between 6 and 11 years mostly use their phones to call their parents (88%) and for text messaging (54.1%).

Parents may view buying their child a cell phone as a necessity or because of constant nagging (but everyone else has one). It therefore becomes difficult to decide whether it is something that your child really **needs** or if it something that they really **want**. This decision perhaps become a little more clear cut when your child starts to specify the exact brand of phone they would like to have – illustrating the successful marketing techniques used by cell phone companies to target the younger market. Cell phone companies are also offering enticing prices and deals that may just push you over the edge.

The bottom-line is that parents are finding themselves in uncharted waters, since this is one area of child development that they can't look to their own childhood or parents to. They have to navigate themselves through this age of technological advancement with little awareness of what possible dangers and contingencies may lie ahead.

The presentation focused on a number of aspects to consider prior to purchasing a cell phone as well as the discussion points that need to be addressed after the purchase. It is important to understand that you are placing a potentially powerful device in your young child's hands that as much as it allows them to have access to the outside world (through internet, calling, texting and instant messaging), you are also allowing the outside world in.

This poses a number of concerns. The first most imminent worry that comes to mind is the possibility of them accessing websites or following links that may expose them to harmful content that may be of a sexual or violent nature. Children are curious by nature and may start to surf the net "just to see what is out there". Very few children have a thorough understanding of the internet and are not aware of how incredibly vast it is and how simple it can be to give away personal details (geotagging, uploading photographs, registering on websites, falling for pop-up advertisements) that may make them vulnerable to predators.

Secondly, cyberbullying has been on the rise, since more and more children are now communicating with each other through instant messaging (IM's, Whatapp and BBM). Suddenly, going home and being away from school and potential bullies, becomes difficult. Social bullying continues through this mode and many children are finding themselves "removed"; "blocked", "attacked" or "excluded" from chat interfaces. The camera capabilities of smart phones also allows for embarrassing pictures to be taken and used as a means of blackmailing or social sabotage.

A third factor that raises concern is the increased tendency to engage in "sexting". An easy trap for tweens to fall victim to, since they do not generally possess the emotional maturity or level of self-confidence to deal with an onslaught of compliments aimed at getting them to engage in misbehaviour.

Numerous security tips were shared with parents regarding responsible parenting surrounding your child's cell phone usage. An agreement can be signed with your child upon receiving a cell phone in

which the terms are clearly stated. Terms could include: time limits (how much time can your child spend on their phone); handing in their phone (suggest a cut-off time after which your **child MUST hand in their phone to you every night**); access (**it is important that you as parent monitor your child's actions at numerous intervals**); agreeing on contacts (make sure you know who your child has added to their contact list); agreeing on what to do should they come across inappropriate content or be sent inappropriate content via a friend; access to the internet etc.)

Please visit www.cellphonesafety.co.za for tips on making your child's cell phone safer e.g. blocking the internet function. As of yet we do not have cell phone monitoring software available in South Africa – something that our tech-savvy parents can work on ☺.

Southdowns College promotes a **no cell phone at school policy**. In order for you to communicate to your child, you can work through reception between 7h00-15h30 and thereafter through Mrs Pat Singh at aftercare. After 18h00, your child may go up to the hostel to ask help from the teacher on duty. Ensure that your child knows your contact numbers and that you make proper arrangements with your child in the mornings.

I would like to urge parents that have already purchased smart phones for their kids to reassess their original intentions and to consider whether a smart phone as opposed to a cell phone that allows them to receive calls and send a few sms's is not closer to what you had in mind. Did you not perhaps get swayed by the constant nagging or fear that your child's social status might be dwindling amongst friends...

If you would like to have a copy of the presentation, you are welcome to email me at: csymington@southdownscollege.co.za