

The Cell Phone Phenomenon

Financial Life Lessons Missed:

If you are like many Americans who celebrate Christmas, this past holiday season was one of great stress and probably great excess. Too much activity, too much food, and, yes, even too many gifts. Somewhere among all this, the message of the season got lost. And chances are, at the risk of being called Scrooge Stevens, I'll bet an important financial life lesson got lost among all the ringing in of good cheer, too. Don't worry. I took a message for you, and I'll relay it for you here by way of a story.

It's Christmas season 2007 and as is our tradition, my wife and I remind our children to write their letter to Santa, so his little elves have time to put their gifts together. (I know, and we will do it until they're 21 too!) After a few days, I see one of my daughters has an envelope packed with magazine cut outs of gifts she wanted. Well guess what! 90% of the cut outs were cell phones! There were pre-paid, pink and glitzy, slim

and sleek, expensive and cheap; cell phones of every imaginable shape and size.

The only problem?

We told her no cell phone. And Santa must have heard us, because under the tree on Christmas morning?

No cell phone. Now, don't hang up on me just yet, because my story begins here. And it's worth a listen, because I am dialing in on what could be a good way to fight our youngsters' incessant quest for material goods- like the cell phone

If you read my previous articles on "What are we teaching our kids" I & II, (available on our website under "Published Articles"), you will see that my wife and I gave additional responsibilities to our eleven and thirteen year old daughters, on top of their



normal responsibilities. These additional responsibilities provide some pre-arranged

stipend called allowance. After we presented our allowance rules, all was fine until the "cell phone phenomenon" reared its ugly head again Christmas '07.

Imagine the following coming at you with the machine gun pace of an eleven-year-old girl. "Dad... well... I got this idea. See, I have \$84 in my savings and you were going to give me X dollars per week in allowance.

And see.. I went online and saw this family cell phone plan and.. for \$20.00 per month on your plan, we can...and... and...and. I can now pay for a cell phone!"

Turning off the ring tones.

Parents, I know you've been there before, too. But, to

me, a "money man" and counsel to a few hundred elder clients, this was tune up time. Plain and simple, priorities have gotten out of whack. To our generation, the thirty & forty something's, who have been lucky enough to grow up with plenty of food, nice shelter, and nice clothing, these things have become givens. I also understand that for certain children, cell phones are a must due to safety issues. But, in a world where essential life-sustaining items have become so trite, so easy, it is understandable why children look at everything they have as rights, not privileges. And yes, I was a victim of that thought process as well, when I was growing up.

But luckily, life, and opening my ears to my elder clients, taught me quickly to think again. Now, these are my daughters we're talking about in this story, and I want them to understand that it's "our job" - y o u , m e , every par-



ent — to teach our children to be good citizens, work hard and be responsible for themselves. Right?

If you agree, then, a cell phone, or if your child is older, maybe a car, should be put in its proper priority position in that, it should be worked for, and be at the bottom, well below food, shelter and clothing. Not for punitive reasons, but to help children differentiate between essential and luxury items, when they start earning money. It's, as I always say, a matter of their money and their life.

"Well, sweetheart, you know what, you can afford that cell phone now!" I said, setting her up for the lesson, "Gee," Mommy chimed in, "Isn't that great? Now that you can afford that cell phone, maybe you can help pay when you pick the restaurant on one of our special nights out."

"Let's see Daddy," my wife continues. "Red Robin costs \$X, her share is \$Y, so you owe us \$Z". "Oh,

that's right, Mommy," I add. "Remember the special school clothes mommy bought?" "Of course, Daddy," she plays along. "She should help pay for those too, so let's see, you owe us "xzy" and your allowance is?"

Our daughter got the message. No cell phone. Period.

Will you accept the charges?

I know I lost some readers here, and I understand. It's tough being a parent. But we owe it to our children to be tough, not mean, but strict, when it comes to doing the right thing. Listen, we have just seen Britney Spears on her third trip for psychiatric help. Somewhere, there was a serious disconnect for this young woman and her family's priorities. And, as our own children witness this continuing media circus, they are being further influenced by the fleeting pop culture that created the "gotta have it" cell phone craze. Let's stop talking and start doing something.

Point blank, we need to teach our children to prioritize: to fight blind consumerism and, keep focusing on what is important in their life, both financially and emotionally.

Remember that many in our age group, statistically, will have trouble supporting our own life styles at retirement. Should we be the same people supplying non-essential or "Look at me" items with no strings attached, to our children?

So, you see, by staying true to priorities, you not only do your child a favor, you do your **own** financial future a favor. Cell phones. Cars. Designer clothes. These are all opportunities calling with a lesson to teach our children. Here is how to answer — when your child makes their push for a luxury item, simply remind them where it belongs — in the luxu-



ry, not the essential column. Eventually they will understand personal responsibility. Now that has a nice ring to it.

Want to text in some ideas?

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