

I Gave My 5-Year-Old a Cell Phone

It turns out he understands gadget moderation better than I do

My wife and I are not helicopter parents. My son is 5, and I'm fine letting him go alone to the park, attend birthday parties by himself, make his own dinner or fly his own helicopter. Unfortunately, however, we have a helicopter child. There are few moments when Laszlo isn't physically touching me or my wife. Which means there are very few times when my wife and I are touching each other.

So while some parents struggle over when to let their kids have their first cell phone, I want to get mine one right now. I figure if he can call me, he might go over to a friend's house without me. Or not freak out about babysitters. Or just let me go to the bathroom.

Then I read last year that LG was selling a phone for toddlers in Korea, called the KizOn. It was a watch with one button and a speaker that connected to two registered users. Reviewers lambasted it as the final sign of the end of children's freedom, but I saw it as a final chance for adults' freedom. Luckily, like all Korean advancements we mock, such as male makeup, robots and avoiding making movies making fun of North Korea, it came to America, renamed the GizmoPal. And I got one right away.

I strapped the large blue plastic watch with drawings of cars, buses and tractors to Laszlo's tiny wrist and showed him how to follow the voice prompts so we could call each other with it. Plus, I explained, the GPS would always let me know where he was. He nodded and said, "Will I always know where you are?" I was suddenly aware that giving my son my cell-phone number was dumber than giving it to my boss.

Also, I find nearly every phone conversation boring, especially the parts when I'm not talking. It was going to be way worse with Laszlo, who is the most boring person I talk to regularly, and I work with political journalists. I was going to be stuck on the phone for hours talking about bad guys, ambulances, police and trials. Talking to a 5-year-old boy is like listening to pitches for one-hour network dramas.

So I hid the GizmoPal until we went away as a family for four days over New Year's and got a hotel babysitter for three nights. He would normally throw a fit over a new caretaker, but the watch made him feel a bit better, along with the fact that we'd be two floors away. At dinner, we noted how surprised we were that Laszlo didn't call. Until I checked the Verizon phone I was borrowing, since the GizmoPal doesn't work with my AT&T service. And I saw that Laszlo had called four times. The only thing douchier than giving your 5-year-old a cell phone is giving your 5-year-old a cell phone and not answering when he calls.

I walked outside and called his watch nervously, figuring that if I have to answer tough questions when I don't pick up the phone for my wife, this was going to be a rough inquisition. I almost started to tell him that yes, I was drinking, but it was a business meeting and it was taking so long mostly because everyone showed up so late, when I realized that Laszlo was totally chill. "I thought, Never mind. I would either call you back or you would call me back," he said. Worse yet, he just called to tell us he loved us. This little bastard was playing some high-level mind games.

The phone was giving Laszlo the reassurance to act more independently, just like I'd hoped. But the most important factor in parenting decisions isn't whether something works; it's how other parents judge you for it. And I live in California, where letting your kids watch television is worse than not vaccinating them for measles. So I asked a dad with older kids who was also staying at the hotel if he thought we were being bad parents by giving Laszlo a gateway drug to technology. "It's like a gateway drug to oxygen," he said. The whole fight about keeping your kids off the Internet, he added, is going to look pointless in a few years, when communication and information are embedded in everything we have. By the time Laszlo is 17, he'll be telling his self-driving car to stay no more than five inches from his mom and dad.

So I sent Laszlo to kindergarten one day with the watch, but he didn't use it during the school day. When I called him after school, he said he didn't like to talk on it in front of the other kids. This seemed very considerate toward others until he explained, "They keep pressing the button." In fact, he said, the watch wasn't all that great: "I like to use it, but I can't use it a lot because my mom is there. When my mom is not there, it's at school and it's not private." If Laszlo can expand his new understanding of privacy to include me in the bathroom, then the GizmoPal was totally worth it.

When I asked Laszlo if he would prefer a real phone, he said he shouldn't get a phone that has a screen until he's 10 because it might distract him. Like it does his mom and dad. I'm thinking of trading my iPhone for a GizmoPal.

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