



Childnet
International

Children & Mobile Phones: An Agenda for Action

INTRODUCTION

The global mobile industry recently surpassed the one and a half billion customer milestone.¹ This means that in just two decades, the use of mobile phones has grown to a level that the fixed phone industry has still not yet reached in more than a century of service. A significant proportion of those users are young people and children, a group that has embraced mobile phone technology perhaps more than any other. This document seeks to set out and promote principles which will significantly contribute to promoting positive use of this powerful technology by children and young people.

Taking the UK as an example, almost 60% of secondary age children and around 20% of primary age children own mobile phones. Other countries such as Japan and parts of Scandinavia have even higher take-up levels among young people. Clearly the development and roll-out of mobile technologies is occurring at different rates in different countries and markets and the mobile industry will be in a position to respond more immediately in

some countries than others to the current and future challenges that these technologies will present for children. Nevertheless, what must be universal from the outset is a commitment to recognizing that children and young people across the world have a right not only to be empowered through the use of these technologies, but also a right to be protected as they seek to make the most of the benefits and opportunities which the mobile revolution offers them.

Children and Mobile Phones:

An Agenda for Action has been written by Childnet International, a non-profit organisation committed to making the Internet a great and safe place for children. The document seeks to introduce the issues which all those involved in developing and delivering new interactive mobile services need to review to ensure that children can really benefit from the new technologies.

Footnotes:

¹Including all mobile technologies. Source: EMC World Cellular Database, June 2004

“If you took away my phone you would take away a part of me”.²

The new generation devices are no longer mobile phones only, and it will shortly be possible to do almost everything on an Internet-enabled phone that can be done from an Internet-connected computer. The latest models, and particularly those coming onto the market in the 3rd Generation wave of technology, offer access to a diverse mix of broadcast and entertainment media, including photography, video, radio and music, games, Internet browsing and personal software applications, including SMS, MMS and video messaging, chat, contact, dating and adult subscription services. M-payment mechanisms are already in use in some parts of the world, and it is envisaged that in the future mobile phones will also contain comprehensive personal data.

“ The challenge is to ensure that the positive aspects for children far outweigh the potential negatives. ”

In addition to this plethora of facilities and services, a number of key factors make mobile phones particularly attractive to children and young people, far more so than what is often seen by young users as the more “traditional” or even “old-fashioned” fixed Internet:

the personal and private nature of mobile phones, making parental supervision almost impossible

the “always on” facility that offers round-the-clock communication with friends and also facilitates spontaneity in responding

the importance of the phone in the context of image, status and fashion

the “fun factor” offered by the vast array of features that turn a communications device into a powerful entertainment tool

the price, which means that the phones themselves and access to the services they provide are within the reach of many young consumers.

Whilst these factors offer huge potential, Childnet International’s concern is that these very features and facilities that make mobile phones particularly attractive to young users also offer the potential for misuse that could put children at risk. The challenge is to ensure that the positive aspects for children far outweigh the potential negatives, and that those who stand to benefit most are empowered to do so.

Footnotes:

² Comment from a 15 year old UK girl interviewed in Childnet’s research.

PRINCIPLES FOR ACTION

Realism and balance

A constructive and effective response requires an honest assessment of the potential hazards children and young people could face through the misuse of mobile phone technology, as well as an honest acknowledgement of the issues addressed and the lessons learned in the fixed Internet world, with which many parallels can be drawn.

In attempting to face and tackle the problems and risks, it is also essential to maintain and present a balanced view of the very real benefits of mobile phones and the Internet to young and older users alike. These technologies offer unprecedented opportunities for communication, education and entertainment, and can make a significant contribution to breaking down not only the so called “digital divides”, but also barriers caused by disability, disadvantage and prejudice in the “real world”. Childnet International is already promoting the use of mobile phones to overcome social and ethnic barriers in its Childnet Challenge project³, and seeks to foster creative use of the Internet through the Cable and Wireless Childnet Academy⁴ programme.

Shared responsibility

No single sector is responsible for addressing the potential problems presented by the misuse of mobile phones, or for finding workable and effective solutions to the dangers. One of the key lessons from the fixed Internet is that constructive approaches rely on all sectors, including users themselves, working together.

International action

By definition, the Internet and mobile phone technology both reflect and enable a global view of the world. It is impossible for action in a single country, no matter how effective, to provide the answers. Only by encouraging international cooperation can we identify and promote effective strategies to protect the youngest and most vulnerable in our society. It is essential that industry associations and governments alike identify and implement best practice on an international level.

SPECIFIC ISSUES

The risks to children and young people in using mobile phones can be broadly divided into what Childnet has categorised as the “3C’s”: Content, Contact and Commercialism.

CONTENT – *Illegal*

The worst form of content is that which directly exploits children through portraying abuse, particularly child sexual abuse. Child abuse images are illegal in most countries, but adults with a sexual interest in children have recognized and exploited the potential of the Internet to enable them to collect and distribute such material, and the Internet, in conjunction with other digital technology, has facilitated the swift and anonymous creation and distribution of abusive pictures and video. Mobile phone technology, including the increasingly sophisticated camera phones coming onto the market, will offer a further possible medium for abuse and may potentially be more difficult for law enforcement agencies to trace. In the fixed Internet world, many countries use hotline mechanisms to deal with illegal content, particularly abusive images of the children. These organizations work with industry and law enforcement to trace illegal material, and to have it removed from the Internet through notice and take down mechanisms. The INHOPE Association⁵ coordinates and facilitates their work on an international level.

CONTENT – *Harmful*

There is also other content that may be perfectly legal, but may nonetheless have the potential to harm children. Adult pornography exists in abundance on the Internet, and this is becoming increasingly available through mobile phones. Indeed, for many operators and content providers this is expected to be a significant revenue stream. The preference for pre-pay phones among young people means that it is very difficult to establish the age of consumers, and this in turn means that operators must look to new ways of verifying the age of users, to ensure that children cannot access content which should be restricted to those legally defined as adults. This also includes gambling sites.

But the concern for children's safety extends beyond pornography and gambling to other types of material where children may not understand the context or recognize the dangers. Race hate content is a key area of concern, but information on tools for violence, cults, drugs, and eating disorders are just a few examples of other kinds of material available freely through the web which could be used to exploit or damage children and young people.

CONTACT

In the context of mobile phone technology, this is the most immediate area of concern. Other communications media offer the potential to facilitate dangerous contact with children, as has been seen in the fixed Internet, but the proliferation of mobile phones among young people, coupled with the personal nature of the devices, mean that those who want to establish direct contact with children for the purposes of sexual exploitation - away from parents and other caregivers - have a ready made means for doing so. In Japan young people are using 3G phones to access online dating sites leading in some cases to sexual abuse⁶. Chat, contact and dating services in particular provide opportunities to make inappropriate or even dangerous contact with young users, and location-based services offer the facility to track down children, not only for those who have a legitimate need to do so, but also for those who would exploit them.

Among young people themselves, bullying can be perpetrated and potentially intensified using mobile phones, and already in the United Kingdom it has been revealed that one in every four children has been the victim of such activity⁷. The technology can make the bullying much more pernicious, extending the reach of the bully from the playground even to the victim's bedroom.

COMMERCIALISM

Children are often the targets of conventional advertising in traditional media such as magazines and television. The difference with advertising in new interactive technologies is the opportunity for an immediate response to the advertiser both to purchase the product or service and to provide personal information. This potentially enables

advertisers to bypass parents and carers and exploit children. It is essential that companies developing and promoting mobile phone services for children ensure that they adhere to advertising standards and codes that apply in other media⁸.

The costs associated with mobile phone use also present challenges in promoting positive use among children and young people, as does the possible risk of mobile phone addiction, a potential problem coming under increasing scrutiny⁹.

Another aspect of commercialism exists in the swift development of the handsets themselves. There is considerable pressure on young people to have the latest handsets with the latest features, in order to be ahead of the fashion stakes – mobile handsets are an important part of image and status among young users. The high incidence of mobile phone theft may also be attributable in part to this trend.

Mobile phone spam creates not only commercial pressure but also actual cost, in encouraging users to respond to unsolicited text messages that may trigger ongoing communication. Such spam relates to all kinds of content, including sports results, music news, pornography, and ringtones or logos, all of which are likely to appeal to a wide audience, including young consumers. The use of mobile technology for viral marketing among influential young people builds upon this activity, and can be a very powerful marketing tool in the hands of a retailer, increasing peer pressure to purchase and the spontaneous and immediate means to do so¹⁰.

Footnotes:

³ www.childnetchallenge.org

supported by Vodafone Group Foundation.

⁴ www.childnetacademy.org supported by Cable & Wireless.

⁵ www.inhope.org

⁶ See Childnet's report of its Experts' Conference in Japan in 2003. www.childnet-int.org/downloads/tokyo-conference.pdf

⁷ NCH research: see www.nch.org.uk/itok/

⁸ Such as those laid down by the Advertising Standards Authority in the UK: see www.asa.org.uk and the Children's Advertising Review Unit in the United States (see CARU.org)

⁹ A recent UK study undertaken by the University of Lancaster for the Teleconomy Group indicates that one in three mobile users is addicted, and identifies the "M-Ager" phenomenon – teenagers who cannot live without their phones.

See www.teleconomy.com/pieces/MMMlpr.pdf

¹⁰ In the US, Procter & Gamble, through its experimental teen marketing unit, Tremor, has established relationships with 200,000 influential teens because of their "viral marketing" potential (see netfamilynews.org/nl040611.html#6)



LESSONS FROM THE PAST

The experience of the Internet industry over the last eight to ten years has shown that there are several principles to follow in seeking to promote positive use of technology by children and young people:

1 Adhering to minimum legal liability is not enough. Public expectations are driven by a number of factors, not least the influence of the media and the example of other industries, for whom “fitting safety as standard” has now become a key selling point. Corporate responsibility needs to be seen to go beyond legal liability and to take into account the interests of all consumer sectors, particularly those who are seen as most vulnerable.

2 Dialogue and collaboration are the only effective way forward. No single sector, whether it be government, industry, or consumers, is solely responsible for ensuring that children have a positive experience of using new technologies. All relevant sectors need to work at understanding each other’s issues and viewpoint, in order to work towards finding mutually acceptable approaches and solutions¹¹.

3 Promoting effective awareness, positive and creative use of new technology. This need not be diametrically opposed to establishing commercial advantage. In many countries now, consumers demand and dictate minimum standards of safety in a range of industries and contexts – the increasingly litigious nature of many societies bears witness to this – and to meet or even exceed these standards can contribute to positive commercial differentiation within the marketplace.

LOOKING AHEAD

Given the phenomenal speed at which the technology is developing, it is essential for all sectors constantly to review the emerging challenges presented by mobile phone technologies. These challenges include the following issues:

- ▶ Responding to the high proportion of customers, many of whom do not register their details and are therefore almost impossible to identify, either on an individual basis or in terms of their demographic factors. The Irish government provide an example of a possible response in recently announcing that all 3G phones sold in Ireland are to be registered to their owners¹².
- ▶ The privacy mobile phones afford their users, in particular children, who can now communicate with anyone far from parental supervision.
- ▶ The emergence of location-based services, and the inherent difficulties and dangers in ensuring that such services are not used inappropriately in such a way as to put children at risk of physical harm.
- ▶ Future implications of the development of mobile phone technology as a payment mechanism and as a repository of detailed or even sensitive personal data, extending potentially to include biometric information. Given the high incidence of mobile phone theft, this presents huge challenges in terms of ensuring that personal identifying data does not fall into the wrong hands even if the phone itself does.

Footnotes:

¹¹ In the UK, the Government’s Home Office Task Force on Child Protection on the Internet is one example of dialogue and collaboration among all sectors
see www.thinkuknow.co.uk/parents.htm

¹² www.electricnews.net/frontpage/news-9414117.html



ACTION REQUIRED

All sectors need to play their part in ensuring that children and young people get the most out of using new mobile technology safely. This involves consulting with children and young people themselves, understanding each sector's viewpoints and challenges and working constructively to ensure that children are protected and able to really benefit from the new technologies.

Children and young people

The first challenge remains to ensure that young people are empowered to use mobile technology positively. Advice would include the following:

- ▶ Help your parents or carers get to know about all the cool things you can do on your mobile phone. Show them that you know how to stay safe by following these simple guidelines¹³ below:
- ▶ Only give out your mobile number and other personal details to people you already know and trust offline. Never reply to text messages from someone you don't know.
- ▶ Always keep your PIN number safe.
- ▶ It could be dangerous to go and meet someone you have only met on the Internet or through your mobile phone. Only do so with your parents' or carers' permission and then when they are present.
- ▶ Think before you send. Get your friends' permission before taking pictures of them, and especially before sending pictures to someone else or to the Internet. Remember that as soon as you have sent them, you can't control where they end up.
- ▶ Keep track of the amount of money and time you are spending on your mobile phone so that you don't get into debt or miss out on other activities.
- ▶ Always tell your parent or carer if something that happens when you are online or on your phone makes you feel scared or uncomfortable.

Parents and carers

- ▶ Agree "house rules" with your children about their mobile phone usage, and particularly about online access.
- ▶ Teach your children to be aware of the risks, particularly those associated with contact.
- ▶ Learn to find your way around mobile phones and the range of services and facilities they offer – your children may be the best people to teach you!
- ▶ Urge your mobile provider to provide blocking and filtering, but don't be tempted to rely totally on these. They are only tools, and your own awareness and vigilance are still the most effective protection.
- ▶ Ensure that you register any pre-pay mobile phones used by your children – this could provide a greater level of protection against accessing inappropriate content or services.
- ▶ Change to a more "child-friendly" provider if you are unhappy with the service you are receiving.

Educators and schools

- ▶ Agree and regularly review school policies for the use of mobile phones within the school environment, in particular the use of camera phones.
- ▶ Include positive use of the Internet and mobile technology as part of media literacy within the curriculum and seek to innovate in using the technology positively as part of the learning environment.
- ▶ Liaise as much as possible with parents and carers to ensure that children are receiving consistent advice.

Footnotes:

¹³ See Childnet's Kidsmart website www.kidsmart.org.uk

Government and law enforcement

- ▶ Encourage industry self-regulatory measures to protect children and young people.
- ▶ Cooperate with other governments and international agencies to promote industry cooperation, effective law enforcement and international standards for classifying content, and to develop consistent strategies and responses.
- ▶ Resource and train law enforcement to respond swiftly and effectively to reports of criminal activity facilitated through mobile phone use.
- ▶ Encourage the development of hotlines for receiving reports of child abuse images, whether accessed through the fixed Internet or via mobile phones.
- ▶ Promote awareness about positive use of mobile phones and the Internet.

Mobile network operators

- ▶ Establish relationships and work with other key stakeholders, such as children's charities and the education sector, to identify and respond appropriately to relevant issues.
- ▶ Agree common standards¹⁴ for your business about how you will treat children and young people as customers and consumers.
- ▶ Establish effective ways of verifying the age of users in order to ensure that age-restricted content and contact services are not made available to children.
- ▶ Ensure that all advertising is appropriate for your target market, including children, and does not use inappropriate content to sell products or services.
- ▶ Ensure that all proprietary content and third party commercial content is classified as to its suitability for children, and make age-restricted content available only on an opt-in subscription basis to those customers whose age you have verified.
- ▶ Ensure confidentiality of all customer information, especially that relating to children.
- ▶ Ensure that all services offered on your network and aimed at children offer appropriate advice and tools, and that systems are in place on online interactive services which seeks to ensure users are able to interact safely and appropriately.
- ▶ Cooperate fully with hotlines and law enforcement in tracing and removing illegal content.
- ▶ Provide awareness material and reminders both through the phone itself and offline.
- ▶ Promote and reward positive uses of mobile phone technology.

Product developers

- ▶ Consult widely with other agencies such as law enforcement and the child welfare sector, and consider carefully the child safety implications of any new facility or service before launching it on the market.
- ▶ Explore the development and provision of technical tools for blocking and filtering content to consumers.

Content providers

- ▶ Classify all content as to its suitability for children in order to ensure that age-restricted content is made available only on an opt-in subscription basis to those customers whose age has been verified.
- ▶ Ensure that all content for children maintains the highest ethical standards, particularly where responses are requested and/or personal information is required.

Retailers

- ▶ Work with the mobile industry to establish effective age verification mechanisms and implement these rigorously.
- ▶ Provide awareness materials to all customers at the point of sale.
- ▶ Ensure confidentiality of all customer information, especially that relating to children.

Footnotes:

¹⁴ Such as those embodied in the UK Mobile Network Operators code of practice: see www.o2.co.uk/abouto2/ukcodeofpractice.html



www.childnet-int.org

CONCLUSION

As practitioners working directly with young people, Childnet staff are constantly seeking to innovate and promote positive ways in which new technology can be used to benefit children and others. We have not produced this document as merely a “shopping list” of action points for others to address, but rather want to play our part in working with other players and young people themselves to pioneer effective education and awareness resources and creative, positive projects. However, at the same time it is vital to think critically and challenge all sectors to play their part and work together.

If we are to learn anything from the experience of the “fixed internet” it is that “constant change is here to stay”! We therefore all need to be constantly reviewing the issues and impact of new applications. In this document, we have sought to do this taking, what we hope, is a balanced, holistic approach to the issues. We know that there are very real difficulties and challenges and we welcome a dialogue on the issues outlined in this document from all sectors. Comments can be sent by e-mail to info@childnet-int.org.

The views in this document are solely those of Childnet International (a registered charity in the UK no I080173). This document can be reproduced or quoted as long as the source is clearly acknowledged.

See www.childnet-int.org for full details of Childnet’s work.

See www.childnet-int.org/publications/ for a pdf version of this document.

© Copyright Childnet International July 2004