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Talk to Your Kids About Cell Phone Use

By Larry Magid
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There has been a lot of talk about mobile phone safety, but it has largely focused on distraction while driving as well as the possibility that cell phone use might cause health problems.

But now there's another reason to be concerned. Mobile phones in Japan and Europe have been linked to harassment and sexual exploitation of both children and adults.

I'm not suggesting you jettison your cell phone. I use one, as do my wife and two kids. But, if you're a parent, you should talk with your children about how to protect themselves from exploitation, bullying and invasion of privacy as well as an out-of-control phone bill.

When cell phones were first introduced, they were expensive status symbols, used mostly by well-heeled business people. Now they're ubiquitous. The Yankee Group estimates that a third of U.S. children aged 10 to 19 already have cell phones, but their ranks will grow to two-thirds by 2005. If Japan is any indication, that could be an understatement. Already, more than 80 percent of Japanese high school students and 25 percent of junior high students are equipped with mobile phones. Cell phones are also extremely popular among kids in Europe. The majority of Britain's 7-to-16-year-olds have cell phones, as do 75 percent of teenagers in Scandinavia.

I recently participated in a conference in Tokyo on children, mobile phones and the Internet, sponsored by U.K.-based Childnet International and the Internet Association of Japan. The conference opened my eyes to both the possibilities and dangers inherent with kids' use of cell phones. On a

positive side, a cell phone can be a great communications and safety tool. In addition to keeping up with friends, kids can also use it to check in with parents, respond to parents' calls and phone for help in an emergency. I gave both my teenage kids cell phones not as a privilege but because my wife and I want to be able to reach them and them to check in with us when they're out with friends. We don't just *allow* them to carry the phone -- we *insist* on it, especially when they're out at night.

But there are some dangers associated with this technology. When you put a cell phone in children's hands, you're giving them access to the world and the world access to them, including when they're away from home and parental supervision. What's more, today's cell phones are not just mobile telephones. They're also Web browsers, instant messengers and e-mail terminals. In other words, just about everything you can do from an Internet-connected PC, you can also do from a cell phone.

The Japanese Cabinet Office surveyed teen use of mobile phones and found that 30 percent of the females and 37 percent of males under 20 had accessed "dating sites," which, in some cases, have led girls and women into unwanted sexual encounters with men who expected more than just a "date."

Today most of the problems are related to "texting," but that could change. Several companies have recently introduced phones with color displays, and an increasing number of phones have built-in digital cameras and the ability to instantly transmit photos from phone to phone, via e-mail or to Web sites. Japanese mobile phone companies have long offered camera phones and are now starting to introduce phones that can record moving video.

What's more, cell phone companies are starting to roll out their higher-speed third-generation (3G) networks, which make it practical to download graphics, photographs and video along with sound and text. One company is even talking about experimenting with downloading aroma, though it's not clear whether this is something people will actually want.

A color screen means that your child can look at the same type of graphic content available on the "fixed" Internet from

home. A built-in digital camera means that your child can not only see inappropriate material, but can send it as well. That's my biggest concern. Kids -- and adults, for that matter -- need to be extremely cautious about the way they use this new technology, especially when it comes to sharing digital photos or movies. Pushing a few telephone buttons can send a child's image, phone number and mobile e-mail address to the wrong person. It's even possible to use your cell phone to instantly post photos on the Web for all to see.

I'm also concerned by the fact that phones are phones. Predators cannot only send kids messages, but they can also call them to arrange meetings. Because kids can access the phone while they're away from home, they're particularly vulnerable because they are out of their parents' reach. It's common practice in Europe for predators to groom a child on the Internet and then contact that child via cell phone to arrange a face-to-face meeting, according to Childnet International Executive Director Nigel Williams.

The user of a cell phone is not necessarily anonymous. Although it can be disabled, most cell phones have caller ID on by default. That means that when you call or send a text message to someone, you are giving that person your phone number, which he or she can use to make harassing calls as well as to send unwanted instant messages and e-mail. It's not uncommon for bullies to use cell phones to harass other kids and, tragically, it's not unheard of for children to be contacted on their cell phone by adult predators.

Bullying by cell phone is becoming a major problem in the United Kingdom, according to John Carr of NCH (formerly National Children's Homes), a British child-advocacy organization. A survey conducted by that group found that "mobile phones appear to be the most commonly abused medium with 16% of young people saying they'd received bullying or threatening text messages, followed by 7% who had been harassed in Internet chat-rooms and 4% via e-mail." If your child experiences harassing phone calls or text messages, call the provider to see about getting the number changed.

If all that weren't enough, there is another potential problem. The Federal Communications Commission has mandated

that phones be equipped with "geo location" systems designed to make it possible for others to pinpoint exactly where the phone is located. The main purpose of this system is to enable 911 operators to locate cell phone callers in case of an emergency, but there also are planned commercial uses of this technology to allow businesses to offer location-based products and services to cell phone users. While privacy safeguards will be built in, they can also be defeated. As these services become available, children and adults need to learn how to control them so that they aren't used for the wrong purposes.

Finally, there is the issue of cost. If they're not careful, kids can easily spend \$100 or more a month on cell phone fees. Many plans have free nights and weekends, but make sure your child knows the company's definition of "night," which sometimes starts as late as 9 p.m. Also, there is typically a charge for both incoming and outgoing text messages, Web access and special features such as downloading games, screen savers and ring tones. One way to control costs is to get kids a pre-paid service: When they're out of money, their phone stops working, other than to call 911. Another is to talk with your provider about package deals -- such as a "bucket" of minutes or text messages. At the very least, talk with your kids about using their phone responsibly.

I'm not writing this column to scare anyone but to warn consumers, policy makers and the mobile phone industry that we need to start thinking about ways to enjoy mobile phones while reducing risk.

http://www.pcanswer.com/articles/synd_cellphones.htm