

New forms of content on mobile phones and similar devices

Increasingly, mobile phones and similar devices connected to the mobile networks are available with enhanced features, including colour screens, picture messaging, video cameras, email and internet access and can be used to access a growing variety of content. These advanced features are accompanied by a growing ability within the mobile operators to offer faster data connections over the 2.5G and 3G networks.



As the capability of mobile devices and networks develops, there will be demand from UK consumers to access a wide range of new content and services. Many of these customers are likely to be students and school age pupils.

Whilst it is too early to be able to provide advice with regard to children and young people using 3G devices, this document is intended to highlight some of the potential issues of the new forms of content and new technology, and some of the safeguards currently being developed. This will help schools revise their policies and protocols accordingly to take account of the implications of this technology.

Some network operators are only selling their handsets to persons who can prove they are over 18 but that does not mean that a child could not own or use one if a parent or older sibling has obtained it for them, or if they found some other way to convince the shop that they were older than their true age. It is thought likely that an age verification regime will be introduced and that handsets that are bought for under-18s may only have access to limited services. However none of this detail has yet been finalised and we cannot entirely discount the possibility that a child might turn up at school with their parent's device, or that a parent has, deliberately or otherwise, bought a new device for their child which has been fully enabled, as if for an adult.

In addition to standard mobile telephony services such as voice calls and text messaging, new services will typically include:

- video messaging
- two-way video calling
- mobile access to the internet (using Wireless Application Protocol [WAP] technology)
- entertainment services in the form of video streaming and downloadable video clips from films or sporting events, and music, horoscopes and games etc.
- location based services, such as maps, route planners and the ability to find services based upon the current location of the mobile phone user.

Any or all of the above can have potentially disturbing consequences for young people, particularly the access to inappropriate materials, the ability to send images that can be misused and also the ability for another party to ascertain the location of a pupil using a mobile phone.

It should be stressed that some or all of the above are already available via the existing networks and handsets but because 3G handsets and networks will utilise faster connections and better technology we can expect their usage to start to become more widespread.

Typically new services will be accessed via handsets with larger colour screens, integrated cameras and embedded software such as multimedia players for viewing and recording audio and video clips, and java applications for game playing. Launched in the UK in March 2003, the technology is still maturing. The mass market for 3G devices is emerging now.

Children and young people have always been keen to grasp the opportunities offered by new technology, and these new services will be no exception. As more mobile phone operators come on stream with new services, and handsets become more readily and cheaply available, the appeal to young people is obvious. However, as with any new technology, there are associated risks.

What are the dangers for young people?



Although at the moment there is not full internet access, it is likely that providers of new services will, sooner or later, provide full internet access. All of the potential dangers of easy access to inappropriate sites will be replicated via these mobile devices but, precisely because they are mobile, they will be much harder to regulate and supervise. Potential dangers can typically be grouped into several key areas:

- **Exposure to inappropriate materials**

Children and young people may be exposed to material that is pornographic, hateful or violent in nature or encourages activities that are dangerous or illegal. Equally so, content may simply be age inappropriate, inaccurate or misleading.

At the moment there appear to be no technical solutions to filter content and block unwanted contacts via mobiles although this issue has now been raised with all of the companies concerned so we can expect that situation to change, but it may not be for some time. The most likely way in which it will change, in the short run, is that 3G devices for children will only have access to a limited range of services or places.

- **Physical danger**

There is a risk that whilst online, a child may make inappropriate 'friends', perhaps providing information or arranging a meeting that could risk his or her safety or the safety of family members or friends.

As mobile phones are such personal and private devices it will be difficult for parents to supervise access and contacts in the same way as they would a PC in the home. Mobile phones are typically always on and hence a child is always contactable and always vulnerable.

The rich content capabilities of 3G phones means that young people may be sent inappropriate images or videos, or be encouraged to send back images or videos of themselves using integrated cameras. The integration of cameras within mobile phones may also result in photos of children and young people being taken and circulated or posted on websites without their knowledge or permission.

A new generation of services may also provide more opportunities for personal contact, for example by SMS (short message service) or MMS (multimedia message service) chat, online gaming or dating services.

Additionally, location-based capabilities may mean that it is possible to pinpoint the exact location of children and young people. Whilst this may be welcomed by parents keen to know where their child is at all times, it is not difficult to see how misuse of the technology could arise.

- **Online bullying**

Online bullying, for example by text message, email or via websites is a growing concern associated with mobile telephone use. The newer forms of mobile technology may unfortunately offer a further way for bullies to torment their victims.

- **Legal financial and commercial considerations**

There may be concerns that a child could do something that has legal or financial consequences such as giving out a parent's credit card details or doing something that contravenes another person's rights. Plagiarism and copyright are potential issues especially in relation to downloading music or games.

Again, all of these issues could potentially increase with easy access to chargeable content in the form of games, downloads, ring tones, logos and other services – all of which are particularly attractive to children and young people. The facility to pay for goods and services using mobile phones as an 'electronic wallet' is also set to increase.

Spam by text message is already a growing problem, and the rich media capabilities of 3G devices will undoubtedly mean that advertisers become more sophisticated in their campaigns.

Reducing the risks

The dangers and risks associated with using 3G or other mobile services can be reduced through effective education of the safe and appropriate behaviours to adopt when using this new technology. In common with general safety recommendations, children and young people should be taught the importance of keeping personal information private, the appropriate behaviours to use when online, the need to critically evaluate any information they find, and the importance of seeking advice

from an adult if they see any content or are contacted in a way which makes them feel uncomfortable.

Additionally, the mobile phone operators in the UK are taking the concerns raised by new forms of mobile phone content very seriously. They have developed a *Code of practice for the self-regulation of new forms of content on mobiles* in an attempt to alleviate some of the concerns and dangers presented by the developments in mobile phone technology.

Circulated in draft form for public consultation in July 2003 and finally published in January 2004, the code aims to protect all mobile phone users, with some specific provision for the protection of children and young people. It provides guidance on new forms of commercial content services where these provide adult content and experiences. It also offers guidance on types of access provided by the mobile operators; and combating illegal content provided by third parties on mobile network facilities. It does not, however, cover personal communications between individuals, although the mobile phone operators do recognise that they have an important educational role where new services offer opportunities to communicate in ways that have not previously been possible.



The main objectives of the code are to make parents and carers aware of, and provide access to, tools intended to manage the use of new mobile services for customers who are under 18; and to ensure that illegal content and services are combated with the intention of providing a safer mobile service environment for all mobile customers.

The Code of Practice is available from:

www.t-mobilepressoffice.co.uk/company/content-code.pdf

Sources of further information and advice

There are very few sources of further information and advice relating to children's use of 3G and mobile internet services at present. This area will therefore be developed as the code of practice (mentioned above) comes into operation and the technology matures.

Childnet International

Childnet International is a children's charity committed to helping to make world wide web a safe place for children.

<http://www.childnet-int.org/>

Childnet Challenge

The Childnet Challenge, an initiative of Childnet International, is a project that aims to bring young people from different communities together to collaborate using mobile communications technology. The project website outlines many of the potential positives of this new technology.

<http://www.childnetchallenge.org/>

FKBKO

For Kids By Kids Online (FKBKO) exists to make the internet a better and safer place

for children and young people. The website includes a section on mobile phones, which outlines all the ways in which you can use the technology, in addition to general safety advice.

<http://www.fkbko.co.uk/>

ICSTIS

ICSTIS, the Independent Committee for the Supervision of Standards of Telephone Information Services, is the industry-funded regulatory body for all premium rate charged telephone services. Their website includes a response to the draft code of practice mentioned above (see publications: consultations area).

<http://www.icstis.org.uk/>

NCH IT OK

NCH is one of the UK's leading children's charities. The NCH IT OK website promotes safe and equal access for young people, and includes a link to the CHIS response to the draft code of practice mentioned above (see press/policy area). The website is also developing information on 3G services.

<http://www.nch.org.uk/itok/>