



## **Children and Mobile phones**

This fact sheet has been developed for the Consumer Education Program by the Communications Commission of Kenya. It was compiled by studying material from various authoritative sources and adopting what is universally acceptable and relevant to the Kenyan situation. The purpose of this fact sheet is to provide Consumers with a good understanding of important issues and empower them when making decisions regarding Information and Communications Technology (ICT) products and services.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Most children now have access to mobile phones. It has become a major mode of communication between parents and children. However their parents are not paying attention to the potential risks that this exposure to mobile phones may have on their children. Most parents buy their children mobile phones after the children complete primary or secondary school. Usually the intention of the parent is to communicate and monitor the child.

Phone use it to talk to friends, respond to parents' calls, and call for help in case of an emergency. The phones are also used to send messages as well as to download their favourite ringtones

With convergence in technologies, a mobile phone can be used to access a wide range of services. You can access the internet on most mobile phones and while on this, you have the opportunity to access different forms of content such as entertainment and interactive sites. This access poses a potential risk to children because they might access adult content or use premium rate services.

This fact sheet is aimed at helping parents make more informed choices before allowing their children to access mobile phones it provides answers to pertinent questions relating to mobile phones and the services provided in order to equip parents with the right tools. The fact sheet gives parents the support needed to protect their children and at the same time assisting them get the most out of the phone.

Some of the risks to which children may be exposed to when they have access to mobile phones include:

- High expenditure - Call Costs and charges
- Harassment and bullying
- Grooming and sexual discussions
- Mis-contracting with minors
- Access to chargeable content – Premium Rate Service (PRS)
- Fraud and spam
- Health risks – possible radiation exposure
- Exposure to illegal/harmful/adult content and Violence
- Risks concerning child safety, privacy especially due to inappropriate use of camera phones
- Risks related to behaviour e.g. addiction/dependency.

These risks are explained below:



## **MOBILE HANDSET SAFETY**

Mobile phones are low power radiofrequency transmitters that can emit radiations that may be harmful to children.

A mobile phone's SAR value or Specification energy Absorption Rate reflects the rate at which radiation from handsets is absorbed by the body. An average phone has a SAR value of 1.6w/kg though some are as high as the maximum recommended output of 2.0w/kg.

Research is still going on the possible effects of the radiation on children, especially due to their tender age and possibility of long term exposure. Parents should therefore take steps not to over expose their children to harmful radiations.

Parents should seek information and advice about the phone and the services that are available on it, so that they can ensure their children know how to use it safely. Your mobile provider can give you information and advice on the safe use of their service.

## **COSTS & CHARGES**

If left unchecked children stand the risk of running into debts arising from extravagant use of phone units. Parents should choose tariffs for their children in order to stop them from running into debt.

A mobile phone with a prepaid option is good for parents who want to monitor and regulate how their child uses the phone. However, this poses a risk considering that the phone has to be topped up every time it runs out of units. Further more children are likely to exceed the limits set for them and as a result they may end up borrowing from friends, relatives or others in order to top up.

Prepaid tariffs are good for keeping track of your spending on air time because it by limiting the amount of available credit. However, prepaid services lack itemised billing hence reducing the possibility for parents to supervise who their children communicate with and what services they can access. Post paid services often feature itemised billing.

Note that emergency calls to 999 or 112 can be made even if there are no units, when the phone is locked or even when the SIM card is not inserted. Parents need to teach their children how to access these emergency numbers.

## **INTERNATIONAL CALLS AND PREMIUM RATE SERVICES (PRS)**

Children usually send premium text messages to four digits numbers when they want to buy ring-tones, participate in competitions vote in contests, receive horoscopes, receive text messages with news or sports updates. These premium rate services appeal to young people.



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Many mobile phone service providers provide access to high cost international calls and premium rate services. Children may not realise the cost of using these services, others may access the service without knowledge or permission.

### **CHAT SERVICES AND ACCESS TO UNMODERATED CHAT ROOMS**

Mobile phone chatting and by extension internet chatting offers a loophole for grooming and sexual discussions. Mobile phones therefore become one avenue through which children can be abused and made to feel insecure. Paedophiles have even been known to top up children's phones so that they can maintain communication.

Chat services can be accessed on mobile phones using SMS and WAP. The users can chat anonymously. Types of services include general chat, games (which allow you to chat to other gamers) and dating.

Providers of mobile chat services must implement safety measures that minimise the risk of the service being used to facilitate illegal contact between adults and children. Measures that may enhance the safety of users include monitoring the chat, filtering content to remove possible contact information and placing services behind access controls to restrict access to people who are above 18 years of age.

### **ACCESS TO CONTENT NOT SUITABLE FOR CHILDREN**

This content can be:

- Commercial content - children ordering Premium Rate Service (PRS) with inappropriate content.
- Illegal content accessed via the internet on a WAP-enabled phone. Children can also be producers of harmful or illegal content.
- Harmful content eg pornography - children download video and pornographic materials and share with others to increase popularity.
- Violent content - access to violent games and violent pictures.
- Others may include- privacy violation through inappropriate use of a camera phone where an unpleasant image of the child is taken and risks being posted online or forwarded to others.

Some mobile phone providers provide access to content that is not suitable for children. Before such content can be provided, Service Providers must request for proof that the potential customer is above 18 years r. Proving your age is a one-off action, so if a child inherits a phone, you should instruct your service provider to block access to content that is not suitable for children.. It is important to let your mobile service provider know if content that is not suitable for children is received, in order to protect yourself and other users. If you are not satisfied that your mobile provider has addressed your concerns about the provision of content that is not suitable for children adequately, you may escalate your complaint to the Communications Commission of Kenya.



### **NUISANCE/MALICIOUS CALLS AND MESSAGES**

Children may send or receive unsolicited or threatening calls or text messages from other children. This behaviour can be part of bullying or intimidation. Someone can get hold of your child's mobile phone number or even private items such as photos, videos, emails and bully him/her on phone.

Research has shown that bullying using phone pictures and video clips has more impact on the victim and is more traumatic than traditional bullying. Children normally do not realise that text harassment is a crime and should always be reported to the police.

While bullying is not in itself new, the use of mobile phones may make it harder to deal with. Your mobile phone provider should have procedures and tips to help deal with nuisance and malicious calls.

### **MOBILE PHONE SECURITY**

Children are likely to lose their mobile phone at one time or another. Parents should therefore ensure that they make a note of the phone's International Mobile Equipment Identity (IMEI) number which will help if you need to report and track the phone if it is stolen.

To check the phone's IMEI, key in the following on your phone.

**Star – hash – zero – six – hash**  
**(\* # 0 6 #)**

A fifteen digit code will appear on the screen. This is a code that is unique to the handset. Write it down and keep it safe. Should the phone ever be stolen you can give the code to your service provider so that they can bar the handset from being used by whoever may have stolen it.

### **SMS ADVERTISING/SPAM**

The use of SMS messaging for marketing is an attraction to businesses because it is a cheap. It is similar to e-mail advertising. They both require very little infrastructure and input. Unlike in postal based services Mis-contracting with minors can occur as a result of unsolicited spam where the children become contracting partners who can buy products over the internet. Children however can be subject to fraud and unfair commercial practices

Unsolicited emails/text messages (commonly known as spam) are not as prevalent on mobile phones as it is on the internet. It does exist, however, and can be intrusive and deceptive.

### **BLUETOOTH ENABLED PHONES**

Bluetooth technology is used for short range communication between your mobile phone and to other Bluetooth-enabled devices such as a wireless headset or mobile phone.

This allows communication between your child’s mobile phone and other Bluetooth-enabled phones within the vicinity. If Bluetooth is enabled, your child may receive unexpected and unwanted messages from other Bluetooth phone users nearby. They may be able to access information stored on your child’s phone (a risk known as bluesnuffing). For example, the child’s contact list could be vulnerable. You may want to switch off Bluetooth so the phone is invisible to other users.

**Responsibilities:** There is a general consensus that the responsibility for the safe use of mobile phones by children should be shared between the parents/guardians, industry and the public authorities.

**Responsibilities toward your children**

- Give them a firm foundation in moral and ethical behaviour. Keep all channels of communication open.
- Teach them never to respond to messages that are suggestive, obscene, belligerent, threatening or make them uncomfortable. Encourage them to tell you if they receive such messages. If they do forward some copies to the police or service provider as appropriate.
- Teach them to be cautious and aware of their surrounding. This will minimise incidences of phone theft
- Teach them that not everything they see in the media is true, especially on PRS. If something is too good to be true, it’s probably not true.
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**What can parents/guardians do?**

Parents should always remember that the only reason why a child should have a mobile phone is security. . They should also ensure that they are conversant with the phones functions i.e. its full potential, potential risks and existing tools, before giving it to a child Parents are advised to find out the following information from their service provider and mobile phone vendor before providing the child with a mobile phone.

<b>Risk</b>	<b>Parental Responsibility (Question to ask)</b>
1. High expenditure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you offer both pre-paid and post-paid plans?</li> <li>• How do they compare?</li> </ul>
2. Harassment and bullying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• What can I do if I receive abusive calls or messages?</li> <li>• Can I bar calls from a particular person?</li> </ul>
3. Access to chargeable content – Premium Rate Services (PRS)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Can you bar the phone from making calls and text to international and premium rate numbers?</li> <li>• What can be done to stop a premium rate subscription service?</li> <li>• What safeguards do you have in place to limit the possibility of inadvertently signing up to a reverse-billed service</li> </ul>
4. Fraud and spams	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Do you have a number to call to report spam or</li> <li>• Do you have filters to help block it?</li> </ul>
5. Exposure to illegal/harmful/adult	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Does the phone allow access to content that is not suitable for children?</li> <li>• Is this content automatically blocked by this phone?</li> </ul>



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content	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• How do I report receipt of content that is unsuitable for children?</li></ul>
6. Grooming and sexual discussions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Can these phone access services where users can anonymously chat to each other?</li><li>• What safety measures do you have in place for users of mobile chat services?</li></ul>
7. Safety Advice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What services (Bluetooth, WAP, charting etc) are available on this phone?</li><li>• What is the SAR value associated with this phone?</li></ul>
8. Phone loss	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• What precautions can I take to minimise the risk if the phone is lost or stolen?</li></ul>
9. Internet Access and Bluetooth	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Does the phone have access to the internet?</li><li>• If so, is it possible to disable internet access? Does the phone have Bluetooth facilities?</li><li>• Can I disable Bluetooth or hide the phone from other users?</li></ul>

For more information contact the Communication Commission of Kenya on the following address:

**THE DIRECTOR GENERAL,  
COMMUNICATIONS COMMISSION OF KENYA  
P.O. BOX 14448, NAIROBI, 00800**  
Email: [info@cck.go.ke](mailto:info@cck.go.ke)

*Please note that this Fact Sheet is intended as a guide only and should not be relied on as legal advice or regarded as a substitute for legal advice in individual cases.*

### **Acknowledgement**

This Fact Sheet was developed in partnership with Teknobyte (Kenya) for the Consumer Education Outreach Programme by the Communications Commission of Kenya.

### **Disclaimer**

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