

ask the children



nsw commission for
children & young people

Mobile Me – Kids speak out about mobile phones

In 2007, the NSW Commission for Children and Young People and researchers from the Media and Communications Department at the University of Sydney and the Research Centre for Transforming Cultures, University of Technology Sydney, surveyed and spoke with more than 1,500 children and young people in Years 6 and 9 across New South Wales to learn more about how mobile phones fit into their lives.

We wanted to understand the impact mobiles have on children and young people's relationships, consumer habits and the importance of mobile ownership in their lives.

Australia and mobile phones

Australians have embraced technology with enthusiasm.

In February 1996, only 24% of all households owned or paid for a mobile phone, and few (4%) had access to the internet. This profile changed considerably over the ensuing decade. Averaged across 2002, the proportion of households who had access to a mobile phone had jumped to 72% and, averaged across the 2005-06 financial year, the proportion with access to the internet at home had risen to 60%.¹

Across that time, mobiles have moved from being something of a curiosity to what many would consider to be a necessary part of their daily lives. In particular, mobiles are now a regular part of children's and families' everyday lives.

Who owns a mobile phone?

Any estimate of mobile phone ownership and their use by children and young people needs to be treated with some caution, as getting reliable information about such things can be difficult – and things seem to be

changing very quickly; what might have been true last year may no longer be true this year.

Within our survey sample of 11 to 15 year old students in New South Wales public schools,² most children and young people had their own mobile – between 66 and 82 per cent.

Mobile phone ownership among these children and young people is clearly increasing, and our study suggests it is presently increasing at a high rate.

Many of the young people had had a mobile phone for some years, and the age at which young people get mobiles appears to be falling. Fifteen year olds had virtually no likelihood of having had a phone when they were in Year 3, but among the 11 year olds there was a 10 per cent probability of having had a mobile in Year 3. Many of the 11 year olds who currently have a mobile said they had one in Year 4, whereas the 15 year olds mostly didn't have one until Year 6.

Though both boys and girls are more likely to own a mobile than not, in our study, boys were nearly 20 per cent less likely to own a mobile phone than girls. But age is a major factor in this: girls got their mobiles earlier than boys, though with time boys quickly caught up. At 11 years, boys were 30 per cent less likely than girls to have a mobile, but by age 15 they were about as likely as girls to own one.

This is an interesting finding and might be related to ideas about boys and girls. One idea is that in many

things girls initially grow faster than boys. Perhaps they're more interested in making and talking to friends and using a mobile to do it, before boys are. Another idea has to do with how parents bring up their children, with many parents raising their daughters differently to their sons. Parents might be more protective of their daughters, and more likely to want to know if they need help or not, and to do this at an earlier age than for their sons. At the moment we really can't be sure what is happening.

The main reasons given by children and young people for not owning a phone were because they didn't want one, their parents didn't want them to have one, and relatively rarely they (and their parents) couldn't afford one.

Respondents were more likely not to want a mobile if they were older (15 year olds were three times more likely to say this than 11 year olds), were from non-English speaking backgrounds (nearly 60 per cent more likely to say they didn't want one than those from English speaking backgrounds), and were boys (about 60 per cent more likely to say they didn't want a mobile than girls).

There are two factors associated with children and young people saying it is their parents who don't want them to have a mobile: these are gender and the number of young people living in the local area. Girls were 40 per cent more likely to say their parents didn't want them to have a mobile than were boys; and the more young people living in the local area, the more likely the children and young people said their parents don't want them to have a mobile.

There might be many reasons behind the finding that owning a mobile phone is related to how many young people live nearby. One thing to consider is the potentially higher bills if a child or young person lives in an area where there are lots of other young people, with more young people to be friends with, and more calling and texting to do.

As we will see later on, affordability isn't really a big issue on mobile ownership, so it is likely to be something else. Perhaps given that a strong and influential youth culture naturally develops in areas where there are many young people, parents may be concerned that having a mobile may expose their child to 'bad influences' that may exist within this culture.

Why do children and young people have mobile phones?

The original decision for children and young people to have their own mobile was made mostly by parents. There are two common pre-existing ideas about this. One is because parents are concerned that something really bad could happen to their child, and if their child has a mobile they can call them to get help. The other is a practical one: if their child can always call 'for help', their child can do a lot more by themselves.

While children and young people describe the reasons for having a mobile in various ways, they seem to mean essentially the same thing. They need their mobiles 'to call ppl', at first their parents but later their friends and others.

The purpose of the contact is communication: to tell others about themselves and what they are doing or going to do, and if necessary make or change plans and arrangements. The communication helps everyone better organise their lives and deal with the inevitable problems that can arise in it.

Often children and young people expressed the purpose of the communication in terms of 'emergencies', but emergencies appear to cover a lot of things, and rarely seem to directly refer to safety issues. For example, seldom did anyone mention something as extreme as:

"In case... someone kidnaps me" ³

Some children and young people were clearly told what to do in case of these kinds of emergency:

"so if something bad happens I can ring 000"

Occasionally there was a concrete description of an emergency that had to do with personal safety:

"emergencies e.g. when riding I fall off my bike"

However 'emergencies' were more likely to be something like:

"to contact people when I need them e.g. homework that I forgot to bring"

"in case something goes wrong I could ask my parents to help. e.g. the bus couldn't come"

Having a mobile assures both parent and their child, giving both better control. In the case of the parent, the mobile provides the assurance needed to allow the child to go and do things by themselves; and in the case of the child or young person, the assurance that they can do things by themselves knowing that if things go wrong, they can always get some help.

The purpose is not so much to extend parental control over the situations children and young people find themselves in, but rather to extend the child's or young person's control of the situations they find themselves in: to better enable the child or young person to navigate and manage their own lives.

Mobiles enable children and young people to do things that might otherwise be difficult or inconvenient for them. Many gave examples where having a mobile allowed them to do things such as tutoring, dancing and sport: first in arranging something to happen, and then in being picked up afterwards. Between four and 10 per cent of the reasons given by younger respondents for having a phone was to help organise being picked up after some extra-school activity:

"communication with coaches"

"I got one as I had to attend sporting functions on my own and had to call to get a ride home"

"so that my mum could contact me after sports"

For the 15 year olds who are more likely to make their own way home, being picked up as a reason for owning a mobile declines to between two and four per cent.

For 11 year olds there are other travel-related 'emergencies' when a mobile is useful:

"because I now started walking to school and if anything went wrong I could ring them"

"so that I can catch the train to and from school safely"

"because I had to go home on the bus by myself and they wanted me to contact them when I get on and off"

Getting lost, especially for novice travellers, was a common concern:

"I carry it with me at all times so if I get lost, I can call my parents"

"if I got lost in the shops or something I could call the person I'm with"

Girls are 180 per cent more likely to have a mobile for the purpose of helping with travelling emergencies – perhaps reflecting that difference in parenting style that we mentioned previously.

Interestingly, travelling emergencies are 37 times more likely to be a reason for owning a mobile in wealthier than in poorer areas, where this is rarely mentioned. It's difficult to work out why this might be the case. It's unlikely that travelling 'emergencies' are more likely to happen in wealthier areas. It's more likely to be something else such as differences in parenting styles and how these styles differ depending on where you live.

Not surprisingly, travelling mostly comes up in relation to school. Children and young people start travelling to school by themselves around the transition from primary to high school – sometimes in primary as a prelude to going to high school:

"for going onto year 7 and telling my parents where I am and how I'm getting home"

"so my parents could contact me when I went to high school"

Children and young people often commented on how far away from home their high schools were:

"because my school was far from home so I needed something to keep in touch with my parents"

"to be able to contact my parents, since my high school is further away"

The move to high school can be significant in other ways. Not all primary school friends go the same high school, and sometimes friends move away and mobiles help them stay in touch:

"needed to stay in touch with friends that I won't see again"

"to keep in contact with friends that live far away"

"we moved out of town so it was to keep in contact with my friends"

It's not only friends that children and young people can be separated from and want to keep in contact with. Families can also be separated, and mobiles play an important role in helping children and young people maintain contact with parents living separate to them and arrange their lives under these new circumstances:

"my parents broke up and decided it was best for me to get one and easier to phone"

"my mum went away and I needed to keep in contact with her"

"so I could contact my dad my parents are separated"

"because I had to call my mum to pick me up from dads"

Other challenges include when both parents work and mobiles help them manage these:

"I can contact my parents when they're at work"

"for my safety and my parents to contact me because they were working"

"in case an emergency or my parents work back"

Working or not, parents have busy lives that otherwise can impact on their children and having a mobile helps both:

"to help if my mum and dad are late so they can contact me"

"I got a mobile phone because I have to call my mum if she hasn't picked me up from somewhere"

"I got my phone for emergencies because sometimes I go home from school and my parents are not there"

"so grandma could ring me if she is going to be late picking me up"

And as they grow older, young people start moving into the world of work and when that happens, mobiles help them to communicate:

"to be able to be contacted by work easily"

"so work can call me in"

Generally, mobiles make 'making arrangements' easier, more efficient and flexible:

"I txt friends to organise things to do"

"to keep contact with everyone and to plan things"

"emergency; if something happened at sport e.g. rain"

For many children and young people owning a mobile signals growing independence and are important in creating and nurturing that independence:

"because they're useful and my family has an age when you get your first mobile"

"as I am becoming more independent it is handy to have to contact people, parents"

"makes me more free"

As one of the participants in our group discussions said:

"I feel that as people become older, trends seem to be followed more, and more kids use their phones for social purposes instead of emergencies"

Independence will likely mean some testing, and even weakening, of old relationships:

"because I needed my own form of communication to talk to friends"

"I got a mobile phone so I can... have social conversations privately"

There are other reasons children and young people gave as to why they got their own mobile. Some were attracted to the entertainment functions of mobiles, particularly games and music:

"because at first I just wanted to play games on the phone"

"taking pictures and using music"

"download games and music: also to listen to radio while 'moving'"

For many having a mobile was 'cool':

"because all my friends had one and I thought they are cool"

"so I could contact my parents and also it was cool at the time"

Many also thought having a mobile was necessary because everyone else had one and you needed one to fit in:

"peer pressure and need for something to contact parents when I'm out"

"I wanted one as my friends had them as well"

"to keep in contact with mates, to fit in"

"its expected people of my age to have one; fashionable"

Being so desirable and cheaper, mobiles have become an ideal gift for those that don't already have one and this was the reason some children and young people had one:

"no reason, was a Christmas present"

"because I scored a soccer goal (it was like my best goal, it was out this world)"

And as mobile phone technology becomes more established and its novelty wears off, a common reason for why children and young people get their own mobile becomes recycling:

"my mum got a new one so she gave me her old one for emergencies"

"because it was dad's old one and I wanted one so he gave it to me"

And finally are assorted reasons, which also help to show how commonplace mobiles have become in our lives:

"I won a sim card through a competition"

"because I found it"

"there was a sale for 2 for 1 and my sister wanted one so we both got one"

Most children and young people would survive without their mobile phone, though for some it's indispensable.

The majority of the children and young people who took part in the survey told us that life without a mobile phone wouldn't bother them, or might be annoying but they would cope; on balance this doesn't differ by age. But between 10 and 15 per cent thought it would be 'disastrous'. This was particularly the case for the 15 year olds, who were twice as likely to have this reaction as the 11 year olds.

One of the young people in the study's Research Advisory Group shared his experience of being without his mobile:

"I went a whole week without a phone! And although I didn't go crazy without it, it got quite frustrating when I needed to call a friend or family to organise stuff and especially annoying when my parents had to call my friends phone to find out where I was! So because of that I don't think I will be doing the 40 hour [phone] famine any time soon especially when I love my new phone so much."

In the words of another young person:

"Being in Year 10 I admit I would be lost without my phone because it is my main source of communication because it is quick, direct and easy."

And in describing how they used their mobiles the day before the survey, one respondent wrote:

"Well if my mum wasn't mean and bought me a new one I could have texted numerous people but instead I just admired my broken phone and regretted placing it in the bath tub. I normally used my phone as an alarm and lots of various other things such as internet etc. but because my mum is mean I haven't had a phone for 3 weeks and I'm dying..."

The younger respondents appear to have a lower attachment to them, perhaps reflecting the different ways 11 and 15 year olds use their phones.

What are the main uses of their mobile phone?

Getting accurate information on actual mobile usage is always difficult. In our survey, we asked children and young people to recall their mobile use the day before and how they used their phone in the previous week. Many (nearly 20 per cent) simply couldn't recall.

The number of times mobiles were used is associated with the relative wealth of the local area. Those from relatively poorer areas are likely to make more use of their mobile than those from the relatively wealthier areas: those living in less well off areas were 70 per cent more likely to use their mobiles more than 10 times a day than those living in better off areas, while those in the better off areas were 130 per cent more likely not to have used their mobiles at all.

A common reason given for not using their mobile the day before the survey was because it needed recharging.

"Well I left it at home on the charger all day and had heaps of missed calls then today got yelled at for not answering it. Last night mum forgot to pick me up from work and so I had to use the work fone..."

"Well my phone battery went dead and I forgot to take it to school so now I can't find it"

"My phone was dead so it was recovering on a battery machine"

Many children and young people use their mobiles infrequently:

"I didn't use my phone at all yesterday there was no need. I hardly ever use it only when I remember it is when I use it."

"I rarely use my phone on weekdays, the only thing I do is charge it. Other than that I just have it in my school bag"

Many of the regular users do not use their mobile to communicate with others. An extremely common use is as a watch:

"Check the time when waking up; Alarm to wake up and do paper run; Text a friend in Melbourne; Used as a light to find my bed in the dark"

"Timed myself with the stopwatch"

"I went to school for 6 hours or more, didn't use it at all then because I don't take it to school that often. I got home checked the time on my phone and put it on charge then left it and didn't see it until this morning"

Or downloading and listening to music:

"I listened to music from my phone on the bus trip home"

"My phone was my alarm, I used it to take pictures and listened to music from it"

Many didn't have any credit left on their phone, so could receive calls and messages but not send any:

"My friend rang me on my mobile to tell me the surf was good. I don't have credit so I haven't used it for a bit. I mostly use it when people ring me."

"I do not have any credit all I used it for was to play games and wait for any of my parents to contact me"

"I haven't got any credit at the moment so I have just been checking SMS and receiving calls"

Our respondents used their mobiles the day before the survey for a variety of things including:

"Yesterday I was doing a speech that is due this week and I had to find out something so I rang my friend and asked him. After that I played some games on the internet and finally at 8:00pm I watch a movie and on the commercials I played games on my phone"

"I took pictures yesterday. I was listening to music I tried to Bluetooth my friend a picture and she tried to Bluetooth me a music file. I texted people. I checked the time on my phone"

"Txt parents pick up times. Call friends about homework. Call friends about party. Call soccer coach about positions. Call Boss about work times. Check account balance"

There are few differences between boys and girls in their use. Reporting on what they did the previous week, the only differences are that boys are approximately 40 per cent more likely to have made or watched videos on their mobiles than girls, while girls are 20 per cent more likely to have taken a picture.

There are however large age differences. Fifteen year olds are 20 per cent more likely to have made a voice call, 40 per cent more likely to have stored pictures on their mobiles and 45 per cent more likely to have texted than were 11 year olds, while 11 year olds were 40 per cent more likely to have played games.

Who pays for the mobile phone?

In our sample, between 16 and 27 per cent of children and young people said they paid their own mobile phone bills, while between a further 15 and 20 per cent said they shared the cost with their parents.

We found it is more likely that children and young people pay their own mobile phone bills as they get older. Fifteen year olds were four times more likely to pay their own bills than 11 year olds, and boys were 60 per cent more likely to pay their own bills than girls were:

Researcher: How expensive are they to you? Like how much of your money goes towards your mobile?

Young person: It depends on the occasion. When I lost heaps of money I had to pay all my credit for that one time. But Mum and I have a deal. If I spend like \$15 within two months then she said, "look, I'm happy to recharge it for you because you've been sensible". But if I spend it all in a like a month she says, "Well, you are going to recharge with your money".

Researcher: So do you have to pay for it yourself?

Young person: Yep depending on how responsible I'm being.

[Excerpt from group discussion]

Some of the bills were large: one young person in Year 9 reported spending up to \$100 per month texting friends and family.

How well do children and young people manage their mobile phone costs?

Indications of the influence mobile ownership has on developing at least an awareness of 'credit' are readily found in the descriptions children and young people gave of their daily use:

"I came home from school and texted my friends. I used about \$1.00's credit"

"I was on my mobile and went into the message inbox and saw a question and answered and started smsing and soon I had less credit"

"I put reminders in my phone to remind me of important things. I used it text a couple of friends I may have called recharge once to find out how much credit I had."

"Yesterday I rang my BF, mom, [name] and txt a lot of people; I go threw \$200 of credit a week. On turbo."

"I put my alarm on, check the time, texting my boyfriend, went on the internet, text my bf, phone my bf, phoned my credit dude."

Yet many ran out of credit and then adapted to this by learning to use their phones for receiving rather than sending messages, and mostly for games and music as described above.

Children and young people's experiences in managing costs varied. Girls were 20 per cent more likely to say they were very careful about how much they spend on mobiles as boys were, and boys were nearly 20 per cent more likely to run out of credit at some stage. Yet despite saying they are careful, girls were 15 per cent more likely to have had to borrow money from parents to pay their mobile bills.

As an indication of whether having a mobile is having any effect on children's and young people's skills in managing money, you would expect the older mobile users to be generally better at managing their expenses

than the younger users but this is not what we found.

Eleven year olds were 56 per cent more likely to say they were very careful than 15 year olds, and 15 year olds were 30 per cent more likely to run out of credit. On the other hand, 11 year olds are 14 per cent more likely to have had to borrow money to pay their mobile bills, perhaps because they are less likely to be able to earn the money to pay the bill by themselves.

Again, there appear to be large differences depending on where the children and young people live, including the relative wealth of the area they live in and the number of young people living nearby. Those living in lower income areas were 60 per cent more likely to run out of credit, and were more than 100 per cent more likely to have trouble paying their mobile phone bills.

The association of the number of young people living nearby with managing costs, we suspect, may be saying something about the local 'mobile culture'. Children and young people living in those areas with fewer young people are 140 per cent more likely to be very careful than those in areas with large numbers of young people, while those living in areas with larger numbers of young people are 80 per cent more likely to run out of credit and 70 per cent more likely to have trouble paying the bills.

Mobile phone communication and interpersonal relationships

What makes the study of mobiles so fascinating is that mobiles are not simple tools for communication, but are tools with the potential to change critical aspects of the very process of communication and consequently of how children and young people relate to others.

Primarily this is because they enable communication at a distance: quickly, flexibly and in some respects, directly. Some benefits of this were mentioned earlier including enabling children and young people to build and maintain relationships with friends and family even when they are separated. For example, the ability to keep in touch with old friends from primary school indicates the potential that mobiles can have in building and maintaining relationships with friends. The ability to talk regularly with a separated parent creates new possibilities for the continuity, and quality, of that relationship.

But though direct, mobile communication is different from person to person communication because it reduces those exchanges to talking and text. Even when augmented with pictures or video, what is often a critical element of communication is either eliminated or its quality greatly reduced: namely non-verbal communication. When we communicate, often it's not our words that are so important, but rather what we are doing when we say them including how we look, our facial expressions, or what our body movements and gestures are adding to our words.

Not having access to these non-verbal cues can readily lead to miscommunication. When this is used deliberately it becomes deception:

Young person: Oh but what happened to my friend once on the phone, he was going to go to a movie with one of his friends and then one of his, the guy who was like going with him and the other person rang him up and said 'oh the movie has been called off' but they still went and [friend] didn't.

Researcher: Oh that's rotten.

Young person: Yeah they told how they will call you and say that but you don't know. Like if they say it right to your face you know that they are lying but by phone all they have to do is talk normally and you think 'oh the movie is off'.

Young person: Well cause you can see it in their eyes.

Young person: Yeah, yeah their eyes like that.

Young person: And their faces.

Young person: Yeah like you know they are lying but on the phone...

Young person: Cause they look all nervous...

[Excerpt from group discussion]

How we say something is also important (our tone of voice, inflection) which is eliminated in texting:

Young person: "Because you haven't got the person there so you don't, you can't see their face, you can't hear what tone of voice they are using so it is kind of hard to know whether they are sarcastic or something."

In future this might change, but the present high incidence of text-dominated communicative exchanges, often with abbreviated, concentrated text, may be affecting interpersonal relations by excluding non-verbal communication.

On the positive side, the more controlled and restricted nature of mobile communication can help children and young people who otherwise have problems in communicating and relating to others. Some children and young people texted friends as a substitute for ringing them because it helped them plan what they were going to say in advance:

Young person: I text people, I don't call them. I don't like ringing them I find it really awkward.

Young person: Yeah, because you never know what to say. But then when you are messaging them you always think of something...

[Excerpt from group discussion]

For some of the children and young people, mobile phones help them manage their social insecurities and shyness.

Young person: The only thing is that like, people say things in text messages that you probably wouldn't say to someone's face, because they are not there... That always happens when you are texting.

Researcher: Can you think of an example?

Young person: People ask each other out through texting out all the time. Yeah and like, they wouldn't do that face to face...

[Excerpt from group discussion]

Some forms of communication might be easier when there isn't non-verbal communication, because emotions (and associated anxieties) may not be so readily called out, and hence are less likely to get in the way.

Researcher: ...So people asking each other out. What about breaking up?

Young person: That is a big one.

Young person: Because they haven't got the guts to say it to their face but I reckon that's cheap...

[Excerpt from group discussion]

The ability that mobiles provide to mislead others can be turned into amusement such as playing practical jokes on friends or family. Although practical joking could be annoying, it was usually seen as harmless fun by both those doing it and those who had experienced it.

Young person: ...most of the time I don't call people. Or if I want to call them then I just prank them and they call back.

Researcher: When you say you prank them what does that mean?

Young person: I ring and I wait for it to ring like once and then I just hang up. And then they call me back.

Young person: They go 'you just tried to call me' and you go 'yes'.

Young person: And they are like on the same plan as me except that they pay for all their calls to me. (laughter) ...

[Excerpt from group discussion]

On the other hand, non-verbal communication provides much of the information that can be used to regulate communication, helping to keep it in check. When that check is gone, people may go further in what they say than they otherwise would.

Young person: People like fight and stuff, if they like sent each other a text message.

Young person: And they can kind of go off all night, maybe they are swearing and stuff that they wouldn't.

Young person: My brother said to someone 'on a text message you are having an argument with anyone' so I don't, I don't argue through text message so I don't have a problem with it.

Researcher: But you were saying they swear more on text?

Young person: I reckon that people can, 'cause they haven't actually got the person there, like they can actually let fly a lot more than they usually would...

Young person: "The only thing is that, like, people say things in text messages that you probably wouldn't say to someone's face, because they are not there."

[Excerpt from group discussion]

The use of mobile phones by children and young people to bully others has been widely publicised in the press, and we wanted to see what kinds of bullying were taking place, and how common that was. What we found was a bit surprising, given the publicity surrounding bullying.

In the schools we visited to talk to groups of children and young people about mobile phone use, no one personally knew of any bullying (though they spoke about non-mobile bullying), and only one young person thought they knew about someone being bullied:

Young person: I don't know if it has happened.

Young person: I don't know, it hasn't happened to me but you know.

Young person: It hasn't happened to me.

Researcher: Well that is good.

Young person: Yeah that is very good.

Young person: Well like...

Young person: It could have happened to someone at the school but we wouldn't have known about it. So...

Young person: Yeah...

Young person: We haven't heard like anything.

Young person: That it has happened to anyone.

Young person: From friends or anything that it has happened.

Young person: Cause our school is pretty good with that stuff...

[Excerpt from group discussion]

All the children and young people we spoke with were familiar with the issue, quoting television programs and other media. Some of the schools had had police officers give talks on the subject; or otherwise had made repeated efforts to alert their students to mobile bullying and what to do if it happened. Either because of this or despite it, bullying did not appear endemic in the schools we visited – our research didn't find it, unless it's there but mostly unrecognised by the children and young people to whom it applies.

It was also apparent that, despite all the discussion about mobile bullying, the students weren't really sure what bullying was. Though between 64 and 76 per cent of our surveyed children and young people with a mobile reported that they had never received a rude or threatening phone call in the past, between five and 10 per cent reported that they had received a number of rude or threatening phone calls since owning a mobile phone.

But it is not at all clear whether these rude or threatening phone calls were 'bullying', or something else. From what the children and young people we spoke with said, they tend to think it is something else like the 'fighting and stuff' described above.

The likelihood of a rude or threatening call increases substantially with age, with 15 year olds nearly four times as likely to have received such a call as 11 year olds. Apart from age, there appeared to be no differences.

We also found that between seven and 10 per cent reported they had had a photo taken of them that made them feel uncomfortable; and most of these reported that the photo was then sent to other people to embarrass them.

While mobiles are important because they give children and young people greater control over their lives, newer technologies appear to be threatening to undermine that control. Bluetooth and the internet, as they become more seamlessly integrated with the mobile phone, are prime examples.

Bluetooth technology is now a standard feature of many mobile phones. It uses short range radio frequencies to automatically create wireless connections between mobile phones located within relatively short distances of one another. That connection can now be used for the purposes of sharing files, commonly personal photographs and sound files, at no cost.

However, there can be complications, as Bluetooth connections can create security problems as the mobile user doesn't have complete control over all the information that might be accessed from their phone.

While some children and young people responded well to Bluetooth technology because of its possibilities and because it was free, others felt this kind of technology had the potential to be intrusive, as messages could come from anyone, be very personal and invade their privacy.

They also felt there was a risk that others could have unauthorised access to their phones via this kind of technology. We did get examples of unwanted communications through Bluetooth, but no clear instances of bullying:

Young person: My sister was on the train once and someone took a photo of her that she didn't know. They Bluetoothed it to her phone and she accepted it and opened it up and she couldn't work out who it was. So it was a bit creepy.

Young person: That is what I reckon was a bit scary about Bluetooth because people you don't know can access like your phone and send you stuff if you have your Bluetooth on, anyone can send you stuff or anyone can.

Young person: You can decline.

Young person: Yeah but some people don't have a lock and if you don't have a lock they can go onto your phone and access files you have...

[Excerpt from group discussion]

Summary of our findings

Mobile phones may play a significant and positive role in helping children and young people and their families adapt and find new opportunities to grow.

We have found that mobiles aren't simply a convenience for worried parents to exert control over their children, nor have they been captured by contrary teenagers to control parents through manipulative deception. Instead, mobiles are a good thing, part of a communication revolution, helping both children and young people and their parents meet the changing circumstances of modern life.

Most importantly, mobiles support the well-being of children and young people by supporting their agency or power to take independent action, increasing their capacity to act independently in their everyday life. Children and young people have previously told us that this agency was fundamental to their well-being.⁴ Mobiles also help children and young people to maintain stronger relationships across greater distances, including family relationships within separated families.

We also found that mobiles empower parents by freeing them to undertake the activities and tasks that are increasingly part of family life including when both parents work.

There are different profiles of mobile phone usage that we need to better understand – some are active users, some passive; some are communicators, others are using the other features such as games and the alarm clock.

We found that using and owning a mobile provides different opportunities for children and young people to learn about managing money and spending responsibly but it's not yet clear how much they are really learning.

Many children and young people seemed to accept regularly running out of credit as a fact of life (something they would just learn to live with and adjust to in other ways) rather than a money management challenge.

Children and young people are aware that critical elements of communication are lost with mobiles and that this can be negative because they don't get to see people and work out what they are really saying.

There are clearly examples of the negative use of mobiles, but mainly these are annoyances; of the potential for greater verbal aggression, of deception, rather than bullying.

But there are warning signs of what's on the horizon. With technologies such as Bluetooth, and with closer integration of mobiles with the internet, the positive control children and young people have experienced through having their own mobile may face new and greater challenges in the immediate future.

About our research

For more information about this research visit: www.kids.nsw.gov.au/kids/ourwork/researchkids.cfm

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This *Ask the Children* was prepared by staff at the NSW Commission for Children and Young People, the University of Sydney and the University of Technology Sydney.

Notes

- 1 Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2007, Australian Social Trends 2007, Cat. No. 4102.0.ABS, Canberra
- 2 Our survey used a multistage cluster design, where schools were first sampled to be representative of government public schools across the state, and then students from Years 6 and 9 were sampled from within schools. There is evidence of sampling bias, and our suspicion is that children and young people with mobile phones were probably more likely to have been included in the survey than those without a mobile. All statistical estimates in this document are calculated in ways that reflect and account for the sampling design and have been bootstrapped. Confidence intervals are determined at the 90 per cent level of confidence. All reported probabilities are calculated through modelling, controlling for all other demographic factors that may have been associated with any selection bias.
- 3 All quotations are from the answers children and young people wrote to questions in the survey questionnaire, unless otherwise specified.
- 4 NSW Commission for Children and Young People, (2007) *Ask the Children: An overview of children's understanding of well-being*



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