

Mobiles:

How do young people use mobile phones?

Young people like to use mobile phones as it increases their feeling of independence as it enables them to plan arrangements with friends and family. They can also have a lot of fun with games, ringtones and by using mobiles to take pictures. Young people can also exchange data (e.g. pictures or ringtones) wirelessly over short distances using their phone's bluetooth technology. As mobile technology develops increasing numbers of children have access to the internet through their phones, providing them with access to their email, social networking and gaming sites etc on the move.

Why is it good for young people to have a mobile phone?

No young person likes to be without their mobile phone at any time! Though every parent can be heard complaining about the bills, they can also be a good way of keeping in touch with family and friends, and ensuring that your child is safe. The family of Milly Dowler, the teenager murdered on her way home from school has launched a campaign called 'teach ur mum 2 text' through the charity Milly's Fund in an attempt to help parents and their children keep in touch via text.

Sally and Bob Dowler's world was turned upside down when Milly went missing, but they knew they had to let her older sister, Gemma, go out and about like other 16 year-olds and wanted to find a safe and unobtrusive way to stay in touch with her. Text messaging was their solution. It meant they could keep each other posted but save Gemma the embarrassment of always being called by her parents. See www.millysfund.org.uk for more information.

What are the risks that young people encounter when using mobiles?

Apart from young people spending all their time chatting to their friends and not to you (!), there are some risks in their use of mobile technology. A large proportion of new mobile phones have web access, and more recently - mobile TV has been launched. This means that young people can access content from the internet and TV wherever they are, and without parental or teacher supervision. With the advent of picture and video messaging - young people need to be increasingly careful about the images they share. It is very easy for inappropriate images to be shared around a number of phones, changed and even put online, where it is impossible to get back. This is particularly worrying, if images are used in child abuse sites. Young people also need to be aware that they put themselves at risk of mobile bullying, or inappropriate intimate contact if they give out their mobile number to people they don't fully trust.

How can I reduce the risks to my children when they use their mobiles?

There are now mobile phone operators who sell phones with filtering software included, so that children won't access inappropriate websites or content. It is worth checking that your child's phone has this capability. Remind your child that any image they send on their mobile can be changed and shared online, and that once they have sent an image they have lost control of it. Read through the young people's website with your child, and help them to understand that they shouldn't give out personal details such as their mobile number to strangers, or other young people that they don't fully trust.