

CONSUMER TECHNOLOGY

Amazon Childproofs Echo Speakers, Adds Age-Appropriate Audio Content

Alexa won't let youngsters shop online, listen to foul lyrics or talk after bedtime—and she'll praise children who say the magic word



The \$80 Echo Dot Kids Edition speaker comes with a padded case (in one of three color choices), a year of FreeTime Unlimited and a two-year replacement guarantee. PHOTO: WILSON ROTHMAN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

By Wilson Rothman

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Amazon.com Inc. [AMZN -0.20% ▼](#) is focusing on a new niche for Echo speakers: children's bedrooms and playrooms.

Starting May 9, an over-the-air free update is set to allow Echo talking speaker owners to turn on the FreeTime setting, which locks down certain functions, adds new controls and transforms artificially intelligent Alexa from virtual assistant to virtual nanny.

While most Echo speakers are kept in common areas like the kitchen, millions of homes have multiple Echos, Amazon says. As they are increasingly migrating to bedrooms—even children's bedrooms—the new controls are key.

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Parents will be able to apply the controls to particular Echo speakers from inside the Alexa app. They can set a bedtime, after which Alexa won't carry out any requests. They can turn off voice purchasing and filter explicit lyrics from Amazon Music. They can approve certain skills (Alexa apps) for the device—

yes, SAT Word of the Day; no, Mr. Bartender. (No transaction-associated skills, such as Uber or Domino's, are allowed.) And while the household intercom function still works, children can't send messages or make calls to destinations outside the home.

In FreeTime mode, Alexa has the same friendly voice, but offers longer answers to educational questions. ("How many planets are there?" "Who is Harry Potter?") It rattles off child-friendly jokes and songs, praises children who say "please," and comes up with answers to "Alexa, I'm bored."

The sci-fi version of this would be a system that recognizes who the speaker is—child or grown-up—then utters an appropriate response. But not only is the tech behind such a feat pretty complicated, it could create weird logistics: If you enter your daughter's room and ask to play music, it might play your favorites instead of hers.

The Echo's biggest competitor, Alphabet Inc.'s Google Home, has limited YouTube and Google Play music and video content filtering. Apple Inc.'s newer HomePod, a music-centric device, can filter out songs with explicit lyrics.

Parents who already subscribe to Amazon's FreeTime Unlimited service will be able to bring up premium content on FreeTime-enabled Echo speakers, including interactive trivia games, children's Audible audio books and ad-free age-appropriate music streams.

On Wednesday, the company began preselling a bundled \$80 Echo Dot Kids Edition speaker, which ships May 9 when the services launch. Like the Kids Edition Fire tablet, this Dot comes with a padded case, a year of FreeTime Unlimited and a two-year "worry free" no-questions-asked replacement guarantee. (The standard Echo Dot lists for \$50 and often sells for less.)

It was only a matter of time before Amazon introduced parental controls as a selling point. Not long after Amazon unveiled the Echo speaker and its genie Alexa a few years ago, stories of children doing both adorable and horrifying things emerged.

Some parents may still be skittish about putting an Amazon-speaking device in their child's bedroom. But come May 9, this update could relieve some guilt of many parents who have



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already granted their children's desire to have an Echo in their room.

In this age of privacy concerns, when we debate the sanity of placing smart microphones around our house,

at least this puts some limits on when the thing is listening, and how much it can do.

Then again, for Amazon, that is the kind of reasoning that will make this investment pay off: Parents who were against putting said microphone in said bedroom may no longer be as anxious.

Write to Wilson Rothman at Wilson.Rothman@wsj.com