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Cellular Children

Teens Don't Need a Crisis to Call

By *Emily Wax*
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As she leisurely picked through the racks of shiny shirts inside Montgomery Mall, Allison Parver, 17, was confident that she wouldn't miss out on any social gatherings that night. Her sleek, black cellular phone would keep her in the loop.

"My phone is for calling my friends 24-7," said Parver, a senior at Woodrow Wilson Senior High School in the District. "I know where everyone is all the time."

Not exactly what her father, Ron Parver, had in mind when he gave her the telephone about a year ago. "It's for emergencies," he said. "Mostly, it should be used for calling home."

Cellular phones, once the toy of the rich business executive, are becoming a standard amenity for many teenagers and even preteens. The phones are marketed aggressively to a young audience, with gizmos such as alien holograms and toy kittens that hang off antennas and light up with each ring.

Industry experts estimate that 5 percent of teenagers own a cellular phone, and one recent survey by a market research group found that 28 percent of parents with teenagers plan to buy a cell phone for their child within a year.

But on the question of why this new teen accessory is needed, the two generations are at opposite ends. Parents envision it as an expansion of their protective eye. Can't locate the wandering teen? Just dial. Teenagers, on the other hand, see the cell phone as a gift of freedom, a device that instantly connects them to their friends, to every party and to the very latest piece of gossip.

What technology has wrought is a new arena for the age-old struggle between teenage liberty and parental control.

Ron Parver got a reality check last month when he got a phone bill of \$50. But he's not thinking of taking his daughter's phone away. "We review the bills together. We see what goes on," he said. "But we also like that we can reach her any time. . . . It gives you a great sense of security."

The chime of a cell phone echoed through the food court at the Pentagon City mall on a recent evening. Several teenagers at different tables whipped out their phones.

Janelle Burgoyne, 16, sighed and rolled her eyes as she answered the call, playing the part of the busy executive--stressed, indispensable, clearly the most important person in the room.



Young teenagers are using cell phones and companies are marketing designs for the younger market. (Carol Guzy - The Washington Post)

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"Hi, Mom," she said into the phone. "Sure. I'll be home soon."

Burgoyne, who lives in Chantilly, giggled as she recalled how her mother bought her the phone for "emergencies."

"Whenever a friend wants to call me, I'm like, 'Call me on my cell,' " she said. "My mom pays \$30 for 300 minutes. It's pointless to let those go to waste."

Many teenagers agreed that wearing a cell phone has changed several of their habits. In addition to spending more time on the phone, they're also out of the house more often. They find out from friends about last-minute get-togethers they otherwise would miss. Some said they no longer step out of their cars when picking someone up. Why bother ringing the doorbell when you can dial?

Beepers became popular about a decade ago and raised some of the same issues between parents and their children. But teenagers find the cell phones much more convenient. They're also becoming particular about what kind of phone they have. Small and sleek is preferred, and the phone with a keypad that flips open is very cool.

Most parents said these side effects are a price they're willing to pay. "So they use them to socialize," said Burgoyne's mother, Joylonna Burgoyne. "To me, I'm happy to keep in touch with my child and know she's safe."

What drove many parents to make this purchase was the television news footage of children huddled under desks during the shootings at Colorado's Columbine High School, calling police on their portable phones.

"That was almost like a cellular ad right there," said Robert Rosenberg, president of Insight Research Corp., a telecommunications market research group. "There is a ready market, and the companies know it, and the parents and the teenagers love it."

Parents are so intent on equipping their children that several of them are lobbying the Maryland legislature to overturn a 1989 state law forbidding cell phones in schools. A measure introduced by state Del. Jean Cryor (R-Montgomery) would allow students to carry the phones as long as they left them in their lockers or backpacks during classes.

Virginia and the District do not have such bans, but many of their schools have prohibitions on students using cell phones. Administrators say they don't want classrooms or school cafeterias to turn into upscale restaurants with phones chirping.

Most cellular phones cost between \$90 and \$250, and the typical calling plan is \$30 for 300 minutes. To tap into the teenage market, companies are selling prepaid calling cards for \$25, \$50 or \$75. Most companies also have introduced family calling plans where teenagers and their parents pay about \$50 a month for two lines of service and 200 minutes, and the calls between family members are free.

Even parents of younger children are buying the phones. On a recent day inside the Pentagon City mall, 12-year-old Angela Booker strapped on her Winnie the Pooh backpack, grabbed her mother's hand and stepped up to the cellular phone stand. Her cheeks popped into a wide smile.

She gazed at a line of phones all designed to meet her preteen tastes: black phones dressed in cotton-candy pink and glow-in-the-dark green covers, some even painted with Disney characters--Goofy, Minnie, Donald.

"Mom," she said, pointing to the phone with the deliriously happy, floppy-eared

Pluto. "I want that."

"It's not a bad idea," her mother, Mary Booker, responded. Booker, who lives in Northeast Washington, sat down inside the food court to think about the purchase. "I would like to be in contact with you at all times," she said.

Girls are getting the phones more than boys, mostly because parents tend to worry more about their daughters' safety. But the trend is spreading to boys as well.

"My parents didn't want me to get it at first," said Russell Rifkin, 17, a senior at Richard Montgomery High School in Rockville. "I used the reason that they'd be able to get in touch with me. But I really wanted it to be able to call friends."

His father, Norman Rifkin, agreed to pay half the \$90 cost of the phone but required his son to pay the monthly bills. "Now that he uses it for social calls, this will be an interesting lesson for him in seeing just how far money can stretch," his father said.

Other parents pay for the phones and the monthly service, while warning their children that if they rack up the bill too often they may have to pitch in some money.

That hasn't happened yet to 17-year-old Ariana Heideman, of Rockville. "They yell at me all the time about the bill," said Heideman, who had about \$50 in phone charges in a recent month. "But my mom also uses it to get ahold of me, so she lets it go."

But Nicole Caldwell, 16, of Arlington, has been paying her phone bill from the very start. Her grandmother, Mary Smith, 70, insisted on it. "Grandma paying the cell phone bill just won't mean the same thing," Smith said. "She can learn limitations."

To pay her monthly bill, which typically is \$30 to \$40, Caldwell works at the Arlington Animal Hospital part time.

Veronica Crosetto, 17, works part time at Montgomery Mall to pay for her phone. She said her bills have run as high as \$90 a month.

"The bills are totally worth it," said Crosetto, a senior at Winston Churchill High School. "I am always reachable."

As she waited on line for coffee at a French bakery inside the mall, Crosetto chatted on her purple cell phone about the day's news.

"Yeah, his car got totally smashed," she said into the phone. "Oh, hold on?"

She paid for her coffee and a roll. Then she got back on the phone, took a seat and continued to talk as she spread jam on her snack.

Ruby Wilson was asked about the cell phone use of her 16-year-old daughter, Rachel, as the two shopped for clothes at Montgomery Mall.

"She doesn't really have conversations on the phone," Ruby Wilson said. "She only talks for a few seconds."

"Only for about 10, 20 minutes," her daughter responded, as her mother smiled and shook her head.

"I still know that I can find her," said Ruby Wilson. "Now that we have it, we

would both be lost without it."

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