

Child Phone Addicts

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- Give the line a colour and width
- Image teddyphone.jpg, right aligned
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- Subheading is h2
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There was a time when children's **telecommunications** meant two cans connected with string or, for luckier kids, a set of walkie-talkies. But today the mobile phone has become ubiquitous in school playgrounds, with children as young as five having their own. A company in England is even targeting toddlers with a phone designed in the *shape of a teddy bear*.

Three-quarters of Australian children aged 12 to 14 own a mobile phone but by the time they are 15 that number surges to 90 per cent, according to figures from the Australian Communications and Media Authority.

"Because it's parents who come in and sign up for the phones it's difficult to say exactly how much this area has grown but the age at which kids get phones is getting younger," says Carmen Gould, head of customer service at Australian retail chain Crazy John's. "Whereas before it was often teenagers getting mobiles, it's not unusual now for parents to buy phones for children as young as eight."



Why do they have phones?

Most parents cite the peace of mind that comes from being able to contact their children at any time as the main reason behind the trend. "All research into this trend suggests that parents believe that they can improve the safety and security of their children by giving them a phone," says Randal Markey of the Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association.

This view is backed by the most recent study of mobile use among youngsters by the NSW Commission for Children and Young People. After interviewing 1500 children for its Mobile Me report, it concluded it was nearly always parents who decided to get their children phones - to contact them in "case of emergencies". The other reason was that a phone would give greater independence.

Researchers speak out:

- In September a Swedish scientist said children and teenagers were five times more likely to get brain cancer if they used a mobile phone.
- Psychologists have warned children can become too reliant on their phones - or "phone addicts".
- Academics suggest that kids are ill prepared to understand the financial responsibilities that come with a mobile phone.
- some children run up bills of over \$500 per month (\$6000 per year)

- young people are more easily drawn into costly long term plans with the offer of cheap or even free phones if they sign up for 12 or 24 month plans
- Most contentious is the research linking mobiles to brain tumours. While the World Health Organisation and the Australian Radiation Protection and Nuclear Safety Agency say there is no evidence of this connection, some researchers say thinner skulls and smaller brains put children at greater risk.

"It can be a huge problem for some children, who can run up bills of up to \$500 a month. They have little concept of what they are spending - this can lead to getting into constant debt, a very bad financial situation which they can carry on into their adult life with things like credit cards." As for addiction, two Spanish teenagers made headlines around the world in June when they were admitted to a mental health clinic for "phone addiction". The children, 12 and 13, were sent there by their parents, who said they could not carry out normal activities without their mobiles and would spend six hours a day on them.

Such extreme behaviour is uncommon, Queensland University of Technology psychologist Shari Walsh says. "There are certainly teenagers who we are seeing that have an over-reliance on their mobiles and who become anxious at the prospect of going without their phone. "They worry that they'll run out of battery or credit and they'll be forced to go without this way of communicating with their network of friends. It's a big fear for them and it illustrates just how important they see the phone as being to their lives."