



FACT SHEET FOR PARENTS

Today children communicate and learn in ways unheard of ten or twenty years ago. The way that we talk to each other and share stuff is changing very fast. Most changes have been positive. Cell phones allow children to stay in touch with friends and family, parents and guardians. Cell phones can keep children safe in emergencies and help us know where they are. They can give children more independence in a safe way.

Young people, and even small children, usually know more than their parents about how to use this technology, often called ICTs. But young people do not always know how to look after themselves. It is up to parents and teachers to help them, keep them safe and make rules to protect them.

There are risks associated with this technology but the risks are about the way the technology is used and not the technology itself. Most of the risks are similar to those that children experience without the technology – such as bullying, sexual exploitation and abuse by adults and the criminal or risky misuse of personal information. Less risky behaviour, but very irritating and even disturbing, is the amount of time that children spend using cell phones or on computers. We cannot allow children complete freedom in their use of ICTs.

Given the risks, it is tempting to ban cell phones and the use of information and communication technology. But, as responsible adults, we have to remember that technology is not going to go away. It is a growing part of our children's future. We need to protect them by giving them skills to use the technology confidently, wisely and safely.

It is sometimes difficult when your child knows more than you about something to not feel anxious. How can we make rules and regulations that are sensible but that still let our children benefit from the technology?

- You can easily educate yourself about ICTs and their uses. Read the *Understanding ICTS* fact sheet to understand more about how cell phones, computers and social network sites like MXit work. Educate yourself about the risks and discuss these with your child. Explain that your rules aren't because you don't trust them, but because you don't trust strangers. Your child is more likely to listen to you and respect your rules and opinions if they think that you know what you are talking about.
- Encourage your children to see ICTs as something fun and positive that they can control and use. To do this YOU need to develop confidence in using ICTs so that you can help your child use it safely. Don't give the impression that ICTs are something complicated, dangerous and scary.
- Install social network sites such as Facebook and MXit on your own phone computer, and learn how to use them. Make sure that you are on your child's contact or friend list, especially if they are young.

- Make clear rules that are sensible, practical and enforceable. It is easier if you can do this before you agree to give a child a cellphone or to pay for airtime. Set limits on airtime and the amount of time that children can spend on MXit. You can use your cell phone to check this. Be reasonable - remember that young people have a need to be in touch with their peers constantly – it is part of their social development. Cell phones have much more importance for them because of this, than for adults.
- Children genuinely don't usually know how to tell the difference between real friends and people pretending to be friends. People who want to hurt or exploit children can use Cellphones and social networking sites. Explain that social network sites are not the same as a personal diary or address book or a private telephone conversation.
- Encourage your child to use monitored search engines or ones with parental controls. For example, a Web search site like Kid's Click at <http://www.kidsclick.org> is run by librarians.
- Check your child's contact list regularly. First make sure they don't have a second SIM card or phone!) Know who their friends are and their cell phone numbers. Do not ever allow children to meet with strangers unless you are with them. Check airtime use. Adults often exploit children by offering to buy them more airtime.
- If your child disobeys you, you can remove their phone, or place blocks, such the chat room blocking feature.
- Feel free to talk to the school about your concerns and work with teachers to protect and teach your child!

These websites can give you more advice:

- www.mixit.com
- www.kidsamrt.org.uk
- www.thatsnotcool.com
- www.childnet.com
- www.teach-ict.com/gcsehome.html

