

Child Wants Cellphone; Reception Is Mixed

Lisa W. Foderaro



Suzanne DeChillo/The New York Times

Kate and Hannah Stacks with Hannah's Firefly cellphone.

TO her parents' amusement, Hannah Stacks, a third grader in Rye, N.Y., started asking for her own cellphone at age 6. To their consternation, she never stopped. Last fall, after a psychologist suggested tracking her behavior, Hannah, at the sprightly age of 8, got her phone as a reward for not being mean to her little sister for 30 days.

"I was so torn because, of course, I wanted her to stop beating on Kate," said Hannah's mother, Kim O'Connor, a clinical social worker. "But I also thought, at the end of 30 days, what will I have done?"

After securing a foothold in the teenage market, cellphones are quickly emerging as the must-have techno-toy among elementary-school society. Companies are satiating the appetite — and expanding demand — by offering special phones for children like the bright blue Firefly, which features only five keys, including ones with icons for speed-dialing a parent, and allows users to call a maximum of 22 numbers.

Industry analysts say the 'tween market, defined as 8- to 12-year-olds, represents one of the major growth opportunities for the wireless industry. Some 6.6 million of the 20 million American children in that age range had cellphones by the end of 2006, according to an analysis by the Yankee Group, a technology consulting firm in Boston, which projects there will be 10.5 million preteen cellphone users by 2010.

The number of 8-year-olds with phones, Yankee Group estimates, more than doubled to 506,000 over the past four years while the number of 9-year-olds jumped to 1.25 million from 501,000.

Children want a cellphone for reasons obvious to them. It looks cool and makes them feel grown-up. It conveys a certain status. And it lets them stay in near-constant touch with friends and (oh, yeah) parents.

For parents, the decision of when, or whether, to buy children cellphones — paralleling the age-old debate over the appropriate age for ear piercing — is emotionally charged and value-laden, raising ticklish questions about safety and status, maturity and materialism.

Some parents and child psychologists say the need for cellphones among such young children, who are rarely without adult supervision, is marginal, and the gadgets serve mainly as status symbols, quickly lost in a tangle of toys, batteries hopelessly out of juice. Others, though, say the phones are an electronic security blanket for both parent and child in a world of two-career households and split-custody arrangements, Amber alerts and color-coded terror threat levels.

"My kids are never left alone, so this is an emergency backup system," said Cindy O'Neill Vitale, who bought cellphones last summer for her sons, then 8 and 10, before a weeklong vacation with family friends. "I honestly believe that we live in a time now where it's important to be able to have access for whatever reason. God forbid there's another 9/11. I was in the city that day and I couldn't reach them."

Dr. Cornelia Brunner, deputy director of the Center for Children and Technology, a nonprofit research group in Manhattan, said cellphones can serve as "transitional objects" for young children suffering separation anxiety from their parents, and that phones with "reasonably interesting games" might have some "redeeming educational value."

"Dolls are unnecessary too," noted Dr. Brunner, a developmental psychologist. "The only harm is an economic one. Kids whose families can't afford all this junk are made to feel worse and worse, and some parents end up shelling out money that would be better spent elsewhere."

The Firefly, introduced in 2005, costs \$49.99, plus \$15 an hour of talk time (paid in advance); it comes with a backpack clip. Competitors include Enfora's TicTalk, \$99 plus \$25 for 100 prepaid minutes, and Disney Mobile's three youth-oriented phones, unveiled last summer, with a price range of \$29.99 to \$99.99, plus calling plans that start at \$24.99 for 200 minutes.

Brian Schillaci, principal of Indian Hill School in Holmdel, N.J., which spans fourth to sixth grades, said he has seen a sharp rise in the number of students using cellphones. When a committee devised new rules four years ago saying cellphones could not be visible or in use during the school day, Mr. Schillaci said, there were only a handful of incidents a year; now children are sent to the office once or twice a week for cellphone infractions.

Disponível em: <<http://www.nytimes.com>>. Acesso em 29/3/2007.