

## Concern in Europe on Cellphone Ads for Children

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Illustration by The New York Times

The MO1 beginner mobile phone is not as cuddly as a teddy bear, but manufacturers of the curvy crimson-and-blue handset for 6-year-olds promise a similarly warm and fuzzy relationship. They boast about socialization, emotional health and the comforts of “peace of mind.”

And yet such shiny child-size phones are stirring some parental and government unease, particularly at a time when the mobile telephone industry is reaching deeper into saturated markets to tap customers with chubby hands capable of cradling both dolls and phones.

Already, the category of young customers — tweens and teens — is driving subscriber growth in the United States, according to IDC, a technology research firm in Massachusetts, which projects that 31 million new young users will join the market from 2005 to 2010.

The year 2006 was the turning point when the industry started focusing not just on teenagers and adults but also on tweens — children between middle childhood and adolescence, about 8 to 12 years old — and even children as young as 5. Bright new “kiddie” telephones began appearing on the market that can speed-dial grandma and grandpa with a click of a button.

The MO1 — developed by Imaginarium, a toy company, and Telefónica in Spain — prompted some parent groups in Europe to demand a government ban on marketing to children. Here in France, the health minister recently issued a warning against excessive mobile phone use by young children.

The objections are driven in part by a lack of knowledge over the long-term health effects of mobile phone use. But they also appear to reflect an instinctive worry about whether parents should be giving young children cellphones at all. Jóvenes Verdes, an environmental advocacy group for young people in Spain, argues that “the mobile telephone industry is acting like the tobacco industry by designing products that addict the very young.”

While there is no specific evidence that mobile telephones pose a health threat to young users, researchers worry that there is still only scanty scientific information about the long-term impact of radio frequency electromagnetic fields emitted by mobile telephones on the developing brains and tissues of children.

In France the health minister, Roselyne Bachelot, has taken such concerns public, issuing an alert in January urging parents to limit use, reducing children’s telephone calls to no more than

six minutes. Her announcement followed a similar warning by the Health and Radio Frequencies Foundation, a government-backed research group created two years ago to study the impact of radio frequency fields on humans.

"I believe in the principle of precaution," Ms. Bachelot said in an interview. "If there is a risk, then children with developing nervous systems would be affected. I've alerted parents about the use of mobile telephones because it's absurd for young children to have them."

The French foundation is moving now to organize a broad international research project to study the potential risks for children. More studies are developing in other countries. The Mobile Telecommunication and Health Research Program in Britain, which is financed by the state and local telecommunications industry, is in the early stage of organizing a children's study.

Another project, called Cefalo, is under way in Denmark, Norway, Sweden and Switzerland to explore whether mobile telephone use increases the risk of brain tumors for children.

In January, the National Research Council in the United States also delivered a report — commissioned by the Food and Drug Administration — that reviewed existing scientific studies around the world and urged further research on the impact of mobile phone use on children and pregnant women.

"This clearly is a population that is going to grow up with a great deal of larger exposure than anybody else because the kids use the phones all the time," said Frank Barnes, a professor of engineering at the University of Colorado in Boulder who led the study. "And you've got growing bodies and brains, so if there is going to be an impact, that's likely to be a more sensitive population than others." Every year, the average age of novice mobile phone users is dropping, hitting 10 years old last year, according to Scott Ellison, an IDC analyst who forecasts that the 9-and-under market will increase to nine million users in the United States and \$1.6 billion in revenue by 2010.

Telephone use is also getting more precocious in Europe, according to a Eurobarometer survey of almost 1,000 children in 29 countries, most of whom had telephones after age 9.

The youth market is particularly enticing because these customers treat their mobile telephones more like a companion than a device — or like a "doudou" or stuffed animal — as AFOM, the French mobile telephone operators trade association, described it in a report on customers' habits in a summer survey. In general, young customers chatter more on the phone, spending more on the latest games, ring tones and wallpapers.

Governmental authorities around the world have taken different approaches to the health issue. The Health Council of the Netherlands concluded in 2002 that there was no special risk for children, while health authorities in Britain, Russia and France all urge precautions.

The current government view in the United States is that a review of scientific literature "indicates that there is no real suggestion that children are inherently more sensitive to radio frequency radiation," according to an F.D.A. spokeswoman, Karen Riley. But "since children are still developing and have more life span left," she added, "it is not unreasonable to continue to investigate this issue."

When it comes to children, mobile operators and manufacturers have avoided the health issue and focused more on protecting them from pornographic material or bullying messages and photographs on mobile telephones.

In December, Telefónica, which helped develop the MO1 and a more sophisticated version for young children, the Win1, announced a code of conduct for responsible use of mobile telephones by young customers. Orange and Vodafone also signed on, but the accord focused on controlling the visits of minors to sexual content.

French mobile operators — which are facing pressure on the issue — have been meeting with parent groups through their trade association, AFOM, which has pledged not to market telephones for young children. The mobile telephone industry considers telephones safe for children, according to Michael Milligan, secretary general of the Brussels-based Mobile Manufacturers Forum, which represents all the big makers.

"It's really up to parents whether they let children use mobile phones." Mr. Milligan said. "Most parents recognize the enormous safety aspects of mobile phones."

Nokia, the world's leading manufacturer of hand-held telephones, said that it shared that view. "There has been a lot of work done on the effects of mobile exposure over a significant period of time, and there is no scientific consensus that there should be any reason for the impact to be any different on children," said Mark Durrant, a spokesman for Nokia at its headquarters in Finland.

In Europe, scientists are close to wrapping up a broad seven-year study of adults in 13 countries — including Japan, Israel and much of Western Europe — that ultimately could give more impetus and financing to research on children. In what is called the Interphone study, scientists have evaluated more than 6,000 people with different forms of cancer and brain tumors to determine whether there is a link to mobile telephone use.

The early results from some individual nations in the Interphone study have already prompted a few participating scientists to speak of a need for caution.

"Simple measures should be taken to lower the exposure," said Siegal Sadetzki, who heads the Israeli group in the Interphone study and advocates hands-free devices and limitations on use among younger children. "I'm not against cellphones at all. This is a technique that is here to stay. But we have to learn how to use this technique with reason."

The Israeli study, published last May in *The American Journal of Epidemiology*, detected no increased risk of cancer among a smaller group of patients with tumors of the salivary glands, which are near the ear. But when the group was divided between moderate and heavy telephone users, the risk of cancer increased for people who spoke for prolonged periods and used the phone on the same side of the head.

Lead researchers caution, though, that they need to look at the total results from their wider pool of people.

For most parents, decisions about cellphones are driven by other concerns. When his daughter Morgan was 12 years old, Greg Pozgar of Claysburg, Pa., resisted buying a mobile phone for her, mostly because he was worried she might run up a huge bill.

"My biggest concern was whether my children were responsible enough to handle it," he said. "It's not just a toy."

Morgan received her first phone as a Christmas gift and went on to become a champion of text messaging at age 13 in a national \$25,000 competition organized last year by the telephone manufacturer LG.

As it turns out, she does not indulge in a lot of talking on the phone, but she does send and receive up to 7,000 text messages a month. Mr. Pozgar — who has been coaching football for 17 years — has noticed that lately more of his 8- and 9-year-old players are packing mobile telephones.

"I don't necessarily think that's a bad thing," he said. "But how does a kid that old seem responsible enough with not losing or breaking it. My gosh, they can barely remember to tie their shoes."

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