How to encourage children to use mobile phones safely

Targeted health promotion activities can be used to support the healthy use of technology, suggests Karen Moyse

Abstract

The safe use of mobile phones is part of the health promotion duty of children’s nurses and those nurses working in schools. In this article the author advocates that children and young people should be encouraged to keep and use their mobiles in a safe place, avoid lengthy and incessant calls, provide their number only to those they feel they can trust and switch off the phone as soon as possible. They need to take care with the type of messages they send and to tell someone they can trust about any cyberbullying. The nurse can also help with school policies and can attend groups in schools and youth organisations to discuss the positive and negative aspects of mobile phone technology.

Keywords
Child health promotion, mobile phone safety, cyberbullying

WHEN A GROUP of young people was asked what invention they would miss most if they had to live without it, the answer was the mobile phone, which they perceived as an essential tool in developing and maintaining their friendships (Oksman and Rautiainen 2002) and even a part of their identity (Katz 2002). This is also true of children in the UK (Child Exploitation and Online Protection (CEOP) 2009).

It has been estimated that more than 50 per cent of five to nine year olds in the UK own mobile phones (Naish 2009). Children, young people and their families should have appropriate, accessible safety information about the use of mobile phones. This information can be provided by schools, voluntary organisations and health professionals through a variety of teaching and health promotion activities. Children’s nurses are skilled in health promotion with children and young people (Moyse 2009) and are well placed to impart messages of mobile phone safety.

Peer groups

Friendships become increasingly significant during the teenage years (Tassoni 2007). As Ling et al (2003) suggested, the mobile phone provides the means to make friends regardless of time and place. Gillard et al (1998) found that young people tend to have frequent, long conversations discussing their social lives. Having their own mobile phone confers privacy and independence (Green 2002).

Children and young people should be encouraged to keep and use their mobiles in safe places and provide their numbers only to those they can trust. In addition, they need to ensure they do not send unkind or provocative messages to others.

The children’s nurse can encourage mobiles to be used safely so that accidents and difficult situations do not arise.

The following steps should be considered to help protect children and young people:

- Keep the mobile phone in a safe place.
- Give mobile phone numbers only to people who can be trusted, never to strangers (CEOP 2009).
- Observe the regulations on mobile phone use in and around school. Each school should have a policy.
- Think about mobile use when out and about to avoid any possible risks of phone theft and violence.
- Avoid sending hurtful or provocative messages (Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) 2007).
Nurses can reinforce parents’ needs to have rules about their children’s use of mobile phones

Cyberbullying

The mobile phone’s social impact is not always positive. Children have fun with their mobiles, but they also experience difficulties. A recent negative consequence is cyberbullying. Ceop (2009) points out that young people need to be aware that they can put themselves at risk of mobile phone bullying. Unkind messages sent by a bully can spread quickly, with many people knowing what the victim has received, causing further distress. A study from the DCSF (2007) showed that 34 per cent of 12-15 year olds had experienced some kind of cyberbullying. Intimidation techniques include inappropriate calls, texts and pictures. Twyman et al (2009) found that, because of the bully’s anonymity, the victim felt trapped, not knowing where to look or whom to blame, and could become suspicious of anyone. Police and telecommunications companies can increasingly trace bullies and safety features installed on mobile phones can block their activities.

Schools have a duty to protect children and young people, and the DCSF (2007) has suggested that schools should regularly talk with students about cyberbullying. Nurses can provide group teaching in schools on anti-cyberbullying and support for victims (Box 1).

Now that many mobile phones have internet access, cyberbullying could become more of an issue. Nurses can help raise awareness about the risks and how they can be avoided.

Health promotion in practice

The health risks of mobile phones are uncertain. Health risks associated with the use of mobile phones were explored in Mobile Phones and Health (National Radiological Protection Board (NRPB) 2004). The report was inconclusive as to possible harmful radiation from mobile phones, but suggested caution concerning use by children and young people. The report (NRPB 2004), along with the earlier Stewart report (2000), considers limiting children’s and young people’s use of mobile phones and suggests ways this can be achieved, such as discouraging non-essential or lengthy calls and switching off the phone when not in use. Text messaging is favoured over voice communication as the mobile phone is likely to be used for a shorter time. The Health Protection Agency (HPA) (2011) has reinforced these important health messages which children’s nurses may also wish to encourage.

Caution is recommended in relation to use by children and young people because there are mixed views as aired in Martin (2008) and Aydin et al (2011). Nurses need to be aware of the current debates in this area, to be able to answer young people’s and parents’. Nurses should keep up to date in this subject by reading published literature and studies.

This included the discouragement of inessential or lengthy calls and switching off the phone when not in use. The HPA (2010) reinforced these important health messages and children’s nurses should promote them.

Box 1 Preventing and managing cyberbullying

- Discuss cyberbullying with children and young people – for example, in schools, youth clubs, scouts and guides and church organisations.
- Advise children and young people to act confidently and calmly towards cyberbullying (Anti-bullying Centre 2010), and discourage them from thinking that the unkind behaviour of others is their fault.
- Instruct them to tell someone they can trust about any cyberbullying (Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) 2007). They need to talk it through and feel supported. Help make reporting easier.
- Advise keeping a record and saving the evidence (DCSF 2007).
- Encourage blocking the bully’s calls and texts (DCSF 2007).
- Promote the positive use of digital technology (DCSF 2007) so that negative uses do not become the main focus.
- Help with relevant school policies through liaison and discussion with schools.
- Encourage children and young people to give mobile phone numbers only to people who can be trusted, never to strangers (CEOP 2009).
- Children and young people need to observe the regulations on mobile phone use in and around school. Each school should have a policy.
- Avoid sending hurtful or provocative messages.
- Children and young people should never use abusive or threatening language on their phones (Directgov 2011).
- Many mobile phones include cameras. Images of friends should not be forwarded without permission from the friends themselves.
- Nurses can reinforce parents’ needs to have rules about their children’s use of mobile phones.
The mobile phone can help young people stay safe (Haddon 2002), in touch with parents or other support. Box 2 shows health and safety messages that nurses may wish to consider when talking with children and young people about mobile phones. Box 3 lists helpful resources.

**Conclusion**

In the UK, the mobile phone appears to be essential to children and young people in their social activities, and children’s nurses should promote its safe and healthy use. The mobile phone is a digital technology that is helpful, appealing and interesting, as well as potentially risky. A variety of linked health promotion activities can help raise awareness of safety issues.

### Box 3 Health promotion resources

- Displays and leaflets.
- Activity sheets and stickers.
- Link activities with healthcare promotion days.
- Television or radio programmes on mobile phone and internet safety can be used as the basis for discussion.
- Mobile phone companies provide useful safety information as leaflets and online.

**Useful websites include:**

- [www.childline.org.uk](http://www.childline.org.uk)
- [www.thinkuknow.co.uk](http://www.thinkuknow.co.uk)
- [www.direct.gov.uk](http://www.direct.gov.uk)
- [www.kidsmart.org.uk](http://www.kidsmart.org.uk)

## References

- Martin D (2008) Children who use mobile phones are five times more likely to develop brain tumours. Mail Online. September 23.

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Conflict of interest

None declared

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