



WIRELESS PARENTAL CONTROLS

by Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott

WIRELESS TELEPHONES ARE INCREASINGLY POPULAR among young Texans. Nationwide, estimates indicate that more than 40 percent of 8- to 12-year-olds – and almost three quarters of children between the ages of 13 and 17 – have wireless devices.

Kids regularly use their wireless phones to communicate with their friends, and parents appreciate the convenience of being able to stay in touch with their children and monitor their whereabouts. But, parents should be aware of the pitfalls associated with their kids' wireless phones – and steps they can take to protect their children from harm.

It is always important for parents to communicate openly with their children about dangers in the community. When children receive their first cell phone, parents should establish clear ground rules and warn their kids about dangerous situations that need to be avoided.

For example, sexual predators have begun using wireless devices to call or text children. These communications often include sexually explicit language and are intended to lure children into a sexual encounter. If the phone is able to receive photos or video clips, predators also may send lurid images to their young victims.

Investigators with our Cyber Crimes Unit have arrested several sexual

predators who used cell phones to send explicit text messages and images. One Montgomery County predator was arrested after using his computer and cell phone to chat online with an undercover investigator who was posing as a 14-year-old girl. In that case, the defendant attempted to arrange a sexual encounter with the investigator, whom he believed to be a child. As a result, he was arrested, prosecuted, convicted and sentenced to five years in prison.

Wireless devices that allow users to surf the Internet can also pose concerns for parents because children can use those phones to access sexually explicit content, chat rooms and social networking sites. According to one study, almost one in three teens browses the Internet on their phone, and one in five visits a social networking site. So, parents who monitor their kids' online activities at home should also keep an eye on their cell phone-based Web usage.

Children should always avoid calling or texting people they don't already know. Young Texans should also avoid giving out personal information via their wireless device. Kids should immediately inform their parents if they receive any communication—including a photo or video—that is inappropriate, hurtful or otherwise makes them feel uncomfortable. If parents suspect criminal activity or believe their child is

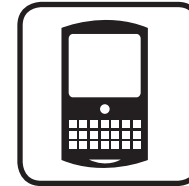
in danger, they should save the image or message and contact law enforcement authorities.

Fortunately, many wireless carriers offer controls parents can use to monitor and manage their child's cell phone use. These controls allow parents to set limits on incoming and outgoing text messages and phone calls. For example, parents can restrict specific phone numbers, limit the quantity of text messages and prohibit communications during certain times of day. Depending on the provider, parents can also filter or completely block Web sites from being accessed by their child's wireless device. Wireless providers generally offer online access to parental controls, so parents can modify them as necessary.

Parents who want to monitor their children's wireless use can usually do so through the providers' Web sites. Increasingly, wireless devices are also equipped with global positioning system (GPS) features that give parents the ability to track their child's whereabouts. Some services will even alert parents when their child enters or leaves predetermined geographic boundaries.

Texans interested in finding out more about parental controls should contact their wireless provider. Most carriers offer at least some parental controls at no charge, while more sophisticated features are available for an additional fee.

POINTS TO REMEMBER



KEEPING KIDS SAFE, APPROPRIATE ON THEIR CELL PHONES

- Proper, safe wireless phone use starts with good communication between parents and children.
- Children should avoid calling or texting people they don't already know.
- If a parent discovers an inappropriate image or text message, they should save it for law enforcement.
- Wireless companies provide controls parents can use to monitor and manage their child's cell phone use.

To learn about and discuss social networking safety on the Web:

www.connectsafely.org

To learn about responsible wireless phone use:

www.wirelessfoundation.org

To file a complaint:

OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL
(800) 252-8011

www.texasattorneygeneral.gov

BETTER BUSINESS BUREAU

www.bbb.org

FEDERAL TRADE COMMISSION

(877) 382-4357

www.ftc.gov



ATTORNEY GENERAL OF TEXAS
GREG ABBOTT