

Protecting Children from Objectionable Content on Wireless Devices

FCC Consumer Facts

Background

Increasingly, people of all ages are using wireless phones and devices for communicating, gathering information and entertainment – in all types of locations. As new wireless technologies are introduced, new and expanded ways to get information and entertainment via wireless devices become available.

But with the benefit of new wireless technology comes a potential danger: the growing use of wireless devices by children affords them the opportunity to access content that parents or caregivers may not want them to see, and to view that content away from adult supervision.

Controlling Access to Objectionable Material

Adult and other potentially objectionable material has become increasingly available to children through broadcast and subscription television, movies, video and audio recordings, video games and the Internet. For television viewing, since January 1, 2000, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has required new television sets 13 inches or larger to contain a V-chip, a device that allows parents or other caregivers to block television programming that they don't want their children to watch. Personal computers that include a television tuner and a monitor of 13 inches or more are also required to include a V-chip. For more information about this technology, see our consumer guide at www.fcc.gov/guides/v-chip-putting-restrictions-what-your-children-watch.

With the recent enactment of the Child Safe Viewing Act of 2007, the FCC will begin looking at blocking technologies for devices in addition to televisions. The Act directs the FCC to begin a study of:

- the existence and availability of advanced blocking technologies that are compatible with various communications devices;
- methods of encouraging the development, deployment and use of such technology by parents that do not affect the packaging or pricing of the content; and

- the existence, availability and use of parental empowerment tools and initiatives already in the market.

The new law directs the FCC to seek information on appropriate blocking technologies not only for TV programming, but content available over wireless devices and on the Internet. The FCC must also examine blocking technologies that can filter language in closed captioning and operate independently of ratings assigned by the creator of the programming. The FCC must issue a report to Congress summarizing its findings.

Voluntary Wireless Industry Guidelines

Cellular Telecommunications Industry Association (CTIA) has developed voluntary guidelines for wireless service providers to use in classifying content that they provide to subscribers on wireless devices. Only content that you purchase from your wireless service provider – either as a single purchase or as part of a package with a monthly fee – can be classified and blocked, if your provider chooses to do so. Content that is generated or owned by subscribers, such as text or instant messages and email (including chat room and electronic bulletin board messages), and content accessed through the Internet, cannot be classified. The guidelines, however, urge wireless service providers to provide filtering software for content accessed on the Internet.

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Voluntary Wireless Industry Guidelines (cont'd.)

Wireless carriers choosing to follow these voluntary guidelines agree to use at least two content ratings, and will block content to those subscribers who wish to limit access. The minimum two content ratings are:

- (1) **Generally Accessible** or available to consumers of all ages; and
- (2) **Restricted** or accessible only to persons age 18 and older, or to persons younger than 18 years old when specifically authorized by a parent or guardian. The **Restricted** ratings system generally is based on or uses criteria under existing ratings systems for movies, television, music and games.

The FCC encourages industry efforts to address consumer concerns about access to content inappropriate for children, but neither endorses nor took part in developing these guidelines. These guidelines are voluntary, do not have the force of FCC rules, and the FCC cannot respond to complaints or take enforcement action for any violations of the guidelines that are not otherwise prohibited by the FCC's rules. You can find out more about the guidelines and the participating wireless carriers by visiting www.ctia.org, calling CTIA at (202) 785-0081, or writing to CTIA, 1400 16th Street, NW, Suite 600, Washington, DC 20036.

What You Should Know

One of the best ways for parents to protect children from viewing potentially objectionable content on a wireless device is to know the types of content and applications (programs) children can access from their particular device. Available selections vary depending on the level of sophistication of the device and the services that you have purchased from your wireless provider. Providers usually offer a one-time download of content or use of an application for a set fee, or offer unlimited downloads of certain content or unlimited uses of certain applications for a flat fee.

The types of content that can be downloaded include:

What You Should Know (cont'd.)

- images, such as background "wallpaper" for the phone screen;
- games, including some games that are also available for gaming systems such as Playstation or Xbox;
- music and songs, including ring tones, ring back tones and downloads of full songs;
- videos, including certain television shows, movies, and music videos, as well as video programming specially made for, and only available on, wireless phones;
- text, photo and video messages. Most wireless devices can also be used to exchange messages, including instant and text messages, as well as photos and videos. If your service includes Internet access, wireless devices can also send and receive emails. These services can be used to request, purchase and receive content from various sources, including websites. For example, users can send a 5-digit "short code" to request certain information, such as a sports score or weather forecast that will be sent directly to their wireless device.

In addition, more sophisticated wireless devices can be used to browse the Internet. Most smart phones such as the iPhone and personal digital assistants (PDAs) have larger screens and full keypads that provide the same capabilities for browsing as a laptop computer. Many wireless service providers also offer access to web pages on frequently-used sites such as Yahoo and ESPN that have been specially designed to be viewed on simpler handsets with smaller screens and limited keypads.

What You Can Do

Here are some practical steps you can take to help protect your children from viewing objectionable content on their wireless devices.

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What You Can Do (cont'd.)

- Know and understand the capabilities of your children's wireless devices and what type of content and applications are available (either included or for an extra fee) under your service plan.
- Ask your wireless service provider about filtering software or other parental controls that can be installed on wireless devices used by children.
- Ask your children how they are using their wireless devices, and what they are sending and receiving or downloading (and from where).
- If your children access Internet websites from their wireless devices, know what sites they are accessing and the dangers associated with them, particularly social networking sites and online chat rooms. For general information about children's Internet safety, see our consumer guide at www.fcc.gov/guides/childrens-internet-protection-act.
- Monitor your bill. Content or application purchases made from a wireless device and not included in your regular service plan should appear as a separate item on your bill. The FCC's Truth-in-Billing rules require telephone companies to describe the services being billed in clear, non-misleading, plain

What You Can Do (cont'd.)

- language. The company sending you the bill must identify the service provider associated with each charge. Each bill must display one or more toll-free numbers that you can call to ask about any charge on the bill.
- Visit websites of online safety, education and help organizations such as www.wiredkids.org.

For More Information

For information about other telecommunications issues, visit the FCC's Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau website at www.fcc.gov/consumer-governmental-affairs-bureau, or contact the FCC's Consumer Center by calling 1-888-CALL-FCC (1-888-225-5322) voice 1-888-TELL-FCC (1-888-835-5322) TTY; faxing 1-866-418-0232; or writing to:

Federal Communications Commission
Consumer & Governmental Affairs Bureau
Consumer Inquiries and Complaints Division
445 12th Street, SW
Washington, DC 20554.

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