

# MEDIA RELEASE



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**News editors – Dr Weerakoddy is available for pre interviews all day Tuesday 26 June, 2007. Please call Sandra Kingston 0422 005 485 in the first instance.**

## **Call to act on 'excessive' teen mobile phone bills**

A Deakin academic has called for more research and action on the 'very real issue' of teen mobile phone use and excessive mobile phone bills.

In a study into mobile phones and children in Australia, Dr Nina Weerakoddy, from Deakin University's Faculty of Arts examined the issues of how children get their phones, who pays for them and the problems often faced by many teenagers trying to pay their bills.

"Australia has one of the highest rates of ownership among children under 18," she said. "In 2005, mobile phones were owned by 80,000 five to nine year olds with half of those being between 13 and 15. "One third were between 10 and 13."

Dr Weerakoddy said the most problematic area with children and mobile phones in Australia was that of unexpectedly high mobile phone bills accrued by some teens.

Previous research has shown that "in extreme cases, roughly 10% of users, this can be up to \$5000 in accumulated charges which parents end up paying or teens themselves pay with a loan from a parent or other adult, which results in anxiety, depression and other problems," she said.

"Yet most of the legal, administrative, public and political debates initiated or contributed to by politicians, lobbyists or interest groups and the media about mobile phones in Australia, are not about the mobile phone-related financial problems. They are about the potential harms of mobile phones eg inappropriate content, bullying, cheating in exams or paedophilia and criminal behaviour rerecorded and disseminated using mobile phone cameras.

"While these matters are important, no real effort is made by these groups to address the real issue of excessive and exorbitant mobile phone bills, which mainly affects teenagers."

Dr Weerakoddy said there was a dearth of independent research on sociological and economic impact of mobile phones, with most research on Australian telecommunications focussing on policy and relationships.

"There is a real need to examine the issue of mobile phone bills and teens as well the issues related to mobile phones and children in Australia," she said.

Dr Weerakoddy said the factors causing the mobile cost blowouts were inflexible mobile phone contracts, confusing and aggressive marketing strategies specifically aimed at the

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teenage market, and inadequate information provided to prospective subscribers.

Other problems included hard to understand contracts, the lack of education of dealers, the public and young people about potential pitfalls and the responsible management of their mobile phone use and expenditure.

Dr Weerakoddy's research also found the mobile phone was both a blessing and a curse for Australian parents and teenagers, as both sought to keep in touch, yet develop independence.

"Mobile phones have eroded parental power over how, when, where and with whom their children communicate," she said.

"At the same time, the mobile phone has become a digital leash for parents to re-establish their control and an umbilical cord allowing children to remain connected with their parents at all times.

"Parents find themselves 'on call' in case of emergencies or for transport. The umbilical cord can not be cast off, even if the parents want to."

Dr Weerakoddy said the issues parents and teenagers faced today with mobile phone technology and the public debates about them as 'villains' are similar to those aimed at other technology such as cinema, TV and the internet were introduced.

"Each new technology becomes a villain when it is first introduced and remains so until the next one comes along, making the old one legitimate," Dr Weerakoddy explained.

"In 1910s for instance, movies were seen as destroying the moral backbone of the future because children were spending their afternoons at the cinema. This perspective in turn made the 'bawdiness' of the 'older' theatre legitimate and so it has gone on."

Dr Weerakoddy said the mobile phone was unique because it was interactive and blended other technologies, and even industries, in one piece of equipment.

"Their interactivity makes mobile phone technology different to the TV, Pay TV or the internet as these were more one way, non interactive technologies," she said.

"Mobile phones, by contrast, allow the young to be both the victims and the perpetrators of anti social behaviour."

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