

Cell phones aimed at children under 8

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A mobile telephone aimed at primary schoolchildren but withdrawn by the main distributor eight months ago because of health fears continues to be sold in Britain.

Health campaigners say they are disgusted that the telephone is still on the market, describing its sale to children as "a disgrace".

The telephone, previously also known as MyMo, is marketed by Eazytrack, a Worcestershire-based company, under the brand name the Owl. It is aimed at four- to eight-year-olds as an " SOS pay-as-you-go mobile telephone", which allows parents to know the location of their child to within 500 yards. The Owl can call only five numbers, as chosen by a parent for use in emergencies.

The telephone, which costs £99, is available online but from next month a new model will be sold in shops.

In January, Communic8, the distributors of MyMo, removed it from the market after the Government's chief adviser on radiation safety warned that under-nines should not have them.

Prof Sir William Stewart, the chairman of the Radiation Protection Division of the Health Protection Agency, said: "I don't think we can put our hands on our hearts and say mobile phones are safe. If there are risks - and we think there may be risks - the people who are going to be most affected are children, and the younger the child, the greater the danger."

Sir William, who has banned his grandchildren from using mobiles, added: "If mobile phones are available to three- to eight-year-olds, I can't believe for a moment that can be justified."

At the time, Communic8 said: "It would be foolish, ignorant even, if we were to simply ignore these findings & Even the remotest possibility of our product becoming a health risk to any child is unacceptable."

The distributor of the Owl, which is identical to the MyMo except for its packaging, has taken a different stance.

Nicholas Seller, 44, a manager for Eazytrack, said the Owl had the lowest emission levels of any mobile, with a rating less than half that recommended by the Government's safety guidelines, and had been approved for sale in Australia. "We totally agree with the Stewart report, that mobiles for children should be for emergencies," he said. "Our phone doesn't have features that encourage heavy use - no texts, downloads of music or ringtones. It's a fine line: parents don't want health worries about their children, but at the same time they want peace of mind. It's their choice at the end of the day." Karen Barratt, a spokesman for the campaign group Mast Sanity, which is concerned about the effect of mobile telephones on children, said she was disgusted that the Owl was being sold in Britain.

"Quite rightly, after the Stewart report, MyMo was withdrawn from the market - but we knew that another company would put them on the shelves as soon as the publicity had died down," she said. "It's a disgrace. Parents are being told by companies that mobiles will keep their children safe - yet half of street crime involves theft of a mobile phone."

Mrs Baratt added: "These companies targeting children have a cleverly worked-out strategy - not only are they expanding their market now but they're securing their market for the future."

The Owl is part of a multi-million-pound industry targeting children in Britain. According to MobileYouth Report 2005, the most authoritative industry research, more than a million children aged five to nine have mobile telephones.

That figure is predicted to rise to 1.5 million by 2007. The report forecasts that this year the number of under-16s with a mobile will rise by 500,000 to 5.5 million.

Eric Huber, a radiologist at Vienna's Doctors' Research Chamber, which has conducted its own research, last week warned against children using mobiles. "If medications delivered the same test results as mobile phone radiation, one would immediately have to remove them from the market," he said.

"We must assume that children are more sensitive to high-frequency radiation than adults. Their skull bones are thinner and their cells show an increased rate of division, making them more sensitive to genotoxic effects."

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