

www.consumer-action.org

PO Box 70037
Washington, DC 20024
202-544-3088

221 Main St, Suite 480
San Francisco, CA 94105
415-777-9648

523 W. Sixth St., Suite 1105
Los Angeles, CA 90014
213-624-4631

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Contact: Linda Sherry, 202-54403088
Ruth Susswein, 301-718-2511

Tools to help parents manage the wireless world

Consumer Action surveys top wireless carriers' parental controls

iPhones, iPads, Androids and more. The explosive growth of data-driven wireless products poses new concerns for parents as young people use (and abuse) the devices.

Consumer Action asked, “How can parents protect their children and spare their budgets?” To get the answers, the national consumer advocacy and education organization surveyed the top six wireless carriers to learn about the parental controls each has to offer. Of the surveyed carriers, AT&T, Verizon, Sprint, T-Mobile and US Cellular offered parental controls, while Metro PCS, a prepaid wireless company, did not.

T-Mobile offers the largest variety of parental control services—earning this distinction because its LG Optimus T smartphones feature “safe driving” controls to block calls and texts while a car is moving—while Sprint offers the most controls for free.

Consumer Action found that, for a price, companies allow parents to control the ways young people use their phones. The fee-based services allow parents to block or limit access to certain functions of cellphones and smartphones at specific times or locations. The cost of paid services can be as high as \$14.99 per month (AT&T’s Family Map plan covering up to five phones), although all carriers have lower cost plans as well.

Depending on the carrier, paid services allow parents to restrict text messaging, calling hours and web access, as well as block images, calls and texts during certain hours of the day or prevent access to online “adult” content if accessed through the wireless carrier’s network. Some carriers allow parents to track or monitor wireless calls and texts and prevent online purchases.

More limited free tools are also available, including data blockers to prevent photos and other large files from being downloaded or sent, and purchase blockers to prevent costly downloads of games or ringtones.

“Many parents legitimately fear that impulsive phone behavior may adversely affect their children’s lives,” says Linda Sherry of Consumer Action’s director of national priorities. “The tools we surveyed allow parents to control certain activities and to keep kids from

being distracted by their phones when they are supposed to be paying attention to school or safe driving. But we learned they are not fail safe, as content blockers may not work when the phones are switched to Wi-Fi to browse the Internet outside carriers' mobile networks."

Consumer Action also investigated some third-party software options for keeping kids' phones under control. eblaster from SpectorSoft can record both sides of a text message and send a copy to parents by email—even if a message is deleted from the phone. iHound Mobile can be used for "geo-fencing" to alert parents when their child's phone or device is not where it is supposed to be at a certain hour, such as at school or practice. Phone Guard Drive Safe keeps a phone from working while it is in a moving vehicle.

The Parental Controls Survey was conducted between March 23 and April 10, 2011. An overview and analysis is featured in the Spring 2011 issue of *Consumer Action News*, the organization's newsletter (http://www.consumer-action.org/news/articles/2011_spring_issue_wireless_special_issue/). Detailed information about each service is provided in a PDF report available here: http://www.consumer-action.org/downloads/english/parent_controls_survey.pdf

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