

The Role of Mobile Phones in Family Communication

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Whilst there is a wealth of research into family communication and family relationships, there is little information about whether (and if so how) mobile phones have impacted on these processes. The authors' study involved individual semi-structured interviews with 60 families, including parents/carers and young people aged 11–17, to investigate this further. The interviews explored how mobile phones are used in family communication; participants' views about the benefits and disadvantages of mobile phone use; and issues around safety, surveillance and privacy. The findings show that young people and parents see mobiles as a key way for families to keep in touch, and to monitor and ensure young people's safety. However, some participants felt there was a downside to this, in relation to some young people either withdrawing into their own social worlds, or having a false feeling of security as a result of having a mobile. Gender differences in views and usage were also found. The paper concludes with some general comments about the role of mobile phones in family life. © 2008 The Author(s). Journal compilation © 2008 National Children's Bureau.

Background

The background to the research was the authors' previous study into 'monitoring and supervision' in families, which was funded by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation (see Stace and Roker, 2005). This research involved paired interviews with young people aged 11–17 and at least one parent or carer, from 60 families. A notable finding from this study was that *mobile phones* are a key feature of modern day communication within families. A key discourse that emerged in the study – from both parents and young people – was the role that mobile phones play in keeping young people safe. Mobiles were seen to enable quick and easy communication between parents and young people, and to enable young people to contact parents or the emergency services in the event of an accident or other incident. Another related, and very common, discourse was that of risk, and the role that mobile phones were seen to play in reducing risk amongst young people. Young people possessing a mobile, and being able to use it at any time and in any place, was seen to reduce young people's risk and vulnerability whilst outside of the home. Mobile phone use was only one of many issues to emerge in the authors' previous study, however, and it was not possible to explore it in any great depth. Trust for the Study of Adolescence therefore secured funding from the Mobile Manufacturers Forum (MMF) and GSM Association (GSMA) to undertake research into this issue.

Some context is useful at this point. There is an extensive literature in relation to parent-child and parent-young person relationships, particularly in relation to monitoring and

supervision, surveillance, independence and autonomy (Kerr, Stattin and Trost, 1999; Stattin and Kerr, 2000; Stace and Roker, 2005). Theoretically, this study draws on notions including family surveillance, family constructions of relationships, and the impact of new technologies on family life (for example Buckingham, 2003; Gillies *et al.*, 2001; Ito *et al.*, 2005). There is a growing literature on the role of technologies in the lives of young people and families. Much of it focuses on how individuals and families use the Internet (for example Holloway and Valentine, 2001; Kerawalla and Crook, 2002). In comparison with this literature, there is not a great deal published on other technologies, including patterns and experiences of young people's and/or the family's use of mobile phones. A few studies are worthy of note, and are briefly mentioned here.

Ling's (2000, 2003) research has looked at how young people use mobiles in their everyday lives, and how families have been affected by the advent of mobiles. Similarly, Ito *et al.* (2005) have reported how mobile phones have become a key part of social and personal lives in Japan. A Canadian study into mobile phone use and advertising (Campbell, 2006) involved interviews with 11 girls aged 14–16. Despite its small sample size, the author provided some interesting insights, including identifying three types of discourse in relation to mobile phone use amongst girls – first a *media* discourse that emphasizes image and independence, second a *parental* discourse that focuses on danger and safety, and third a *youth* discourse that emphasizes self-determination, privacy and sociability.

British research in this area is limited, with only three noteworthy studies having been conducted. The first is a study into mobile phone use reported by Haste (2005). This research involved 725 young people aged between 11 and 21. Almost all these young people had a mobile phone – 97% of females and 92% of males. Significantly, most described their phones in very positive ways, with many considering them a key part of their lives.

The second British study was conducted by YouGov (2006), involving more than 16 500 British adults. They found that 92% of people used their mobile phone everyday, people aged 18–29 used texts far more than speaking, and people felt safer for having mobile phones. It was also found that the older age groups (40+) were less competent with using mobile phones compared with young people.

The third UK study of note explored how people use mobile phones in their day-to-day lives (Crabtree *et al.*, 2003). Key conclusions were that people mostly viewed mobile phones as a tool, that there has been a rise in mobile phone 'manners', and that modern families use mobiles as tools for household management and planning.

Whilst the three British studies above highlight some interesting findings, there has been relatively little *qualitative* research, focussing solely on the role of mobile phones in family communication. The research questions in the authors' study were therefore as follows:

- How are mobile phones used in communication between parents and young people in families?
- What do young people and parents see as the positive and negative aspects of mobile phones in relation to family relationships?

- What factors (e.g. gender, geography) influence how mobile phones are used in family communication?
- How are mobile phones used in relation to risk, safety and surveillance?

Sample and methods

A qualitative methodology was used to collect the data. The main method used was individual interviews with 60 families, involving one young person aged 11–17 and one/two of their parents and carers. A semi-structured interview schedule was developed for use in the study, covering the following topics:

- How mobile phones are used in the monitoring and supervision process, and in communications between young people and parents.
- Benefits of using mobile phones.
- Concerns about using mobile phones.
- Social influences on mobile phone use (age, gender, etc.).
- General views – young people and mobile phones.

The first drafts of the interview schedules were piloted with young people and parents, and questions added and amended as a result. Families were recruited to take part in the research through a variety of routes, including youth services and organisations, youth offending teams, local authorities, and schools and colleges. In total, 60 families took part in the research. Families were drawn from a mix of rural and urban locations, as follows:

- 21 – Greater Manchester;
- 14 – East Sussex;
- 10 – Devon;
- 10 – Hampshire; and
- 5 – London.

In terms of family composition, 36 of the families comprised two birth parents, and 24 families were one-parent households, step-families and foster care families. In terms of ethnicity, 85% of the parents described themselves as White British, with 15% of the families describing themselves as Black, Asian, or Latin American. Two-thirds of the families described themselves as having no religion, with the remainder describing themselves as Jewish, Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, Pagan and Spiritualist.

The interviews with participants were undertaken with parents and young people separately, in their own homes. A small number of interviews were conducted over the telephone. Each interview was tape-recorded (with the participants' permission) and transcribed in full. The data were analysed thematically, using the Nudist computer software to categorise and group responses according to the main research questions.

Additional data were collected from a diary methodology, with young people and their parents recording their mobile phone contacts for each day in a diary over the same seven-day period. In total 31 parents and 26 young people returned their diaries.

Each participant was given a £10 'thank-you' voucher at the end of the research. In addition, participants were sent a summary of the results.

Results

The main results of the study are presented below, first for young people and second for parents.

Young people's views: mobile phone use in general

Mobile phones were mainly used between parents and young people to make plans and arrangements, and in particular for the negotiation of activities. For example:

I always 'phone 'em up if I wanna stay out longer. (Male, 13, Hampshire)

I don't usually use it, really, only when I'm going out with my friends. Then I'll just ring her when I want her to come and pick us up. (Female, 11, Hampshire)

Young people rarely used their phones to 'socialise' with parents – mobile phone use with parents was usually for a specific purpose. For example:

...it's more chatting [with friends]. If I'm at a party, I'll tell them [friends] where I am and say whether it's boring or stuff like that. If I'm bored, I'll text them to say, 'what are you doing' and stuff. But my mum and dad, I'll probably text them to say where I am, or if I'm staying behind at school, or if I need a lift or 'owt like that. Never to just chat. (Female, 14, Manchester)

Interestingly, eight young people commented that they used mobile phones to talk about, or raise more sensitive issues with parents. For example:

Well, I think mobiles can be really good if you've got something you don't wanna tell straight away, like texting my mum that I was getting bullied. You might not wanna say that to her straight out, like. (Female, 15, East Sussex)

I'd maybe text if it's something that I can't, I dunno, something I can't get across and stuff. (Female, 15, East Sussex)

Interestingly, there were matching comments from 10 parents (see later) who talked about how their children broached difficult subjects by text.

Finally in terms of mobile phone use in general, young people rarely described using their mobiles in relation to others such as their siblings, or grandparents. Where mobiles were used with wider family members, this was mainly where relationships were strained or where people were estranged. One example was given by a young woman who lived with her aunt, but wanted to keep in contact with her mother:

My mum will ring me on my mobile and the rest of my family just ring me on my house phone ... because I don't think my aunt would be happy if she picked up the phone and it was my mum, 'cause they don't get on... (Female, 17 London)

Young people's views: benefits of mobile phones

All the young people considered that the main benefits of mobile phones were convenience, being able to quickly negotiate plans, and inform parents of whereabouts. For example:

I can change arrangements at the last minute and ... when I'm out shopping with friends, I can just call my parents when I'm finished shopping and stuff. It makes things a lot more convenient. (Female, 13, Hampshire)

Young people also talked about independence, with mobiles seen as giving more flexibility in their social lives. Mobiles were seen as a 'lifeline', enabling them to stay out later, go further a field, or go to places that parents might otherwise be concerned about. For example:

I wouldn't be allowed to stay out as late or go as far as I do if I hadn't had one. (Female, 15, East Sussex)

Well, if I didn't have my phone with me, my mum wouldn't really let me go that much, she lets me go more 'cause I've got my 'phone'. (Male, 14, East Sussex)

As stated earlier, all the young people in this study viewed mobiles as key to safety. Thus young people stressed that phones could be useful in threatening or potentially harmful situations. For example:

You can contact them wherever you are, you know in an emergency. (Male, 13, Manchester)

...if you're in trouble, you could call the police... (Female, 15, Devon)

The young people also talked about the peace of mind that having a mobile phone gave. This was particularly the case with the younger age groups. For example:

You feel safer. If you're walking through a dark alley and there's no houses and something happens you've got a mobile... (Female, 13, Devon)

I feel safer having it with me, just in case there's an emergency ... like an accident had happened or whatever. And if you'd had your 'phone [you could] speak to anybody... (Female, 11, Devon)

Young people's views: concerns about mobile phones

Theft and muggings were the main concerns that young people talked about. The 25 young people in urban areas were particularly concerned about this. For example:

...my mate was just going in the park, and because he wasn't very smart about it, he was flashing [his phone] and stuff like that, a guy just came up on his bike, and said "give us your 'phone or I'm going to batter you" and he was quite a big guy so my friend gave him the 'phone... (Male, 13, Manchester)

Despite these concerns, all the young people felt they could reduce the risk of being mugged for their phone, and had a range of strategies for this. This included keeping their mobile

phones in a safe and secure place, not showing off new or expensive phones, and being aware of where and when to use them. For example:

I don't see any problem, as long as you keep it out of sight when you're not using it. I just normally have it in my pocket. (Male, 15, Hampshire)

Bullying via mobiles was also a concern for over two-thirds (42) of the young people, who had either received an unpleasant call or text message, or been the victim of phone pranks, or knew someone that had experienced this. For example:

Somebody got my number and was making mean comments, calling me fatso and stuff. (Female, 11, Hampshire)

I was getting bullied for about two weeks and people sent me nasty texts.... I wasn't scared because I knew they couldn't do anything to me, but I just felt really annoyed. (Female, 13 Manchester)

Seven young people also gave accounts of bullying and intimidation through 'happy slapping' – an incident in which an unsuspecting victim is attacked whilst an accomplice records the assault with a camera/video phone. For example:

I've been in class and people have sent round a video of someone being happy slapped and stuff like that.... I know it's quite common at our school.... Like, one day this boy was having a fight with this other boy and this boy filmed it. I thought that was a bit of a horrible thing to do. (Female, 14, Manchester)

Over half of young people (32) also talked about the pressure to have the 'right' model, the up-to-date accessories, and keeping up with current trends and styles. For example:

It's not just about having a 'phone, it's about having a good one. If you've got, like, my mum's (laughs), if I took that into school, everyone would just take the mickey out of me... (Female, 15, East Sussex)

Young people's views: age, gender and mobile phone use

There were clear age and gender differences in the study. Age differences have already been reported using the qualitative statements from participants; quantitative data from the diaries are reported below to support these findings. The diary data also demonstrates gender differences in mobile phone usage.

First, the following table shows all calls/texts *made* in an average week by the age of the young person and who they contacted:

	Mum/dad/carer	Friends – boyfriends/ girlfriends	Other family	Others	Total calls/texts
11 and 12 years	6	6	0	0	12
13 and 14 years	58	173	2	2	235
15, 16 and 17 years	12	96	3	0	111
Total calls/texts	76	275	5	2	358

Second, the following table shows all calls/texts *received* in an average week, by the age of the young person and who they contacted:

	Mum/dad/carer	Friends – boyfriends/ girlfriends	Other family	Others	Total calls/texts
11 and 12 years	9	6	0	0	15
13 and 14 years	68	174	1	1	244
15, 16 and 17 years	20	66	1	1	88
Total calls/texts	97	246	2	2	347

Third, the following table shows all calls/texts *made* in an average week, by the gender (of young person) and who they contacted:

	Mum/dad/carer	Friends – boyfriends/ girlfriends	Other family	Others	Total calls/texts
Females	50	186	5	2	243
Males	29	89	0	0	118
Total of calls/texts	79	275	5	2	361

Finally, the following table shows all calls/texts *received* in an average week by gender (of young person) and who they contacted:

	Mum/dad/carer	Friends – boyfriends/ girlfriends	Other family	Others	Total calls/texts
Females	67	180	2	2	251
Males	30	66	0	0	96
Total of calls texts	97	246	2	2	347

As these tables show, the older age groups (and in particular the 13- and 14-year-olds) had much more mobile phone contact with their parents and carers than younger age groups.

Returning to the interview data, all of the 14- to 17-year-old females used their mobiles regularly, usually on a daily basis. The males described using their mobiles more infrequently. When they did use them, it was mainly for functional and practical purposes. For example:

I think girls use it more than boys, 'cause it's normally girls that are walking about listening to music and they text their friends a bit more often. But boys just have it for emergencies and stuff. (Male, 12, Manchester)

All of the 15- to 17-year-old young women talked about the significant part that mobile phones played in their lives, and were very vocal about what their phones meant to them. For example:

My phone's my life. (Laughs) I don't go anywhere without it. (Female, 17, East Sussex)

(What if you didn't have your mobile?) I'd die, it would be awful. (Female, 15, Manchester)

Young people's views: safety and mobile phone use

All of the young people believed that having a mobile phone enhanced their safety. It was often described as both a back-up measure and a lifeline. For example:

If something happened to you like, if someone tried to grab you, you can run away and ring the police [or call] someone to help, like your parents. (Male, 15, Manchester)

Thirteen young people described how mobile phones could potentially put young people more at risk (through being a target for muggings, or through bullying, etc.). However, they also believed that the good points about mobiles far outweighed the bad. As this young person said:

Well, I think the communication makes a big difference and I don't think it makes that much difference with theft. It might make a difference to bullying, but I think it's outweighed by the communication value of it. (Female, 14, Hampshire)

Seven young people, however, felt that more risks would be taken, because mobiles made young people feel 'too safe'. As these young people comment:

It is false [sense of security], I do think. Because people do tend to think that they can rely on the 'phone, which they can't. (Male, 17, Devon)

I think probably they would, yeah, 'cause if you didn't have a mobile 'phone, you'd think I can't do that because I can't contact my parents. [With mobiles] they can go out really late and they'd still be able to contact parents, but they wouldn't usually do that. (Female, 13, Manchester)

There were even reports of first hand-experience of this:

Well, if I go into town, I'm actually quite happy to split up from my friends, which I wouldn't have been before, without a mobile 'phone. (Female, 13, Devon)

I think I would actually. I do take more risks 'cause I have it. (Female, 15, East Sussex)

Parents' views: mobile phones and family communication

It is useful to start this section on parents' views and experiences with the results from the diaries, and the mobile phone calls and texts sent and received by the parents of the young people.

First, the table below shows how many calls/texts parents *made* to their children in an average week, by gender of parent and age of child:

	Mothers	Fathers	Total
11 and 12 years	10	1	11
13 and 14 years	45	5	50
15, 16 and 17 years	38	11	49
Total	93	17	110

Second, this table shows how many calls/texts parents *received* from their children in an average week, by gender of parent and age of child:

	Mothers	Fathers	Total
11 and 12 years	7	4	11
13 and 14 years	37	4	41
15, 16 and 17 years	43	4	47
Total	87	12	99

Third, this table shows how many calls/texts parents *made* to their children in an average week, by gender of parent and gender of child:

	Mothers	Fathers	Total
Female children	62	15	77
Male children	31	2	33
Total	93	17	110

Finally, this table shows how many calls/texts parents *received* from their children in an average week, by gender of parent and gender of child:

	Mothers	Fathers	Total
Female children	53	12	65
Male children	34	0	34
Total	87	12	99

As these tables show, parents and carers were more likely to communicate with their older children, and their daughters, using mobiles.

Returning to the interview data, the catalyst for getting a mobile was usually starting secondary school. As this parent comments:

... I was determined she was gonna have it before going on to the Senior school, 'cause I thought, really, it's further away and I [can't] meet her from school. (Mother of 16-year-old girl, Devon)

Mobile phones were reported as being used on a daily basis, and as aiding the daily planning of family life. As this parent says:

...we certainly wouldn't use a mobile [for] normal communication. I wouldn't be on the 'phone to him when I'm out and about, just in a chit-chat kind of way at all. Not at all. We just

wouldn't use it like that. We use it for essential communication. (Mother of 15-year-old boy, East Sussex)

Forty parents said that mobiles were rarely used for socialising within the family, but there were reports by six families of young people using their mobiles to communicate about more serious issues. This was particularly the case when face-to-face communication was more difficult. For example:

I would speak to them face to face, but [my eldest daughter]'s more likely to send a text. She sent a text when she found out she was pregnant. Sat in her bedroom texting, rather than actually telling me face to face 'cause when I went upstairs, we did do face to face. But she found it easier to broach the subject like that. (Mother of 14-year-old girl, Hampshire)

As noted in the previous section, young people also identified how they used mobile phones to raise difficult issues, which 'broke the ice' before speaking to a parent face to face.

A large number of the parents (43) considered that their young people would use mobiles for conversations that they did not want their parents to hear. For example:

I think [son] tends to use his mobile more. He's got a lot more secretive stuff, texts and stuff like that – he wouldn't want me to see that – he's a bit [private] about it. (Mother of 13-year-old boy, Manchester)

Parents tended to use the phone for speaking, whereas young people were more likely to text. Parents stated that 'hearing their voice' was more reassuring than a text message. For example:

Sometimes she'll text me back and then I ring her, but I like speaking to her personally ... [it's] human contact, isn't it? Rather than text ... to hear her voice is more reassuring. (Mother of 13-year-old girl, Manchester)

However, contacting young people via their mobiles was not always easy. Eighteen parents talked about young people not hearing, not charging, or sometimes not answering their phones. Indeed, 24 young people talked about how they avoided contact with their parents in these ways. This was a frustration to parents who saw the phone as an essential tool in their relationship, and for keeping young people safe.

Parents' views: benefits of mobile phones

All of the parents considered that easy communication was a key benefit of mobile phones, through making plans, monitoring a child's whereabouts and being able to be more flexible. For example:

...even when she was at school, I could send a text message, 'not gonna be here when you get home, don't panic.' You know, that sort of thing, so yeah it certainly makes life a lot easier ... contact whenever. (Mother of 16-year-old girl, Devon)

Ease of communication was linked to issues of safety. Although the safety aspect of mobile phones was mentioned for both genders, this was considered particularly important for girls. For example:

If she was ever in any trouble and she needed our help, she could 'phone us. Or if she had the 'phone the authorities, the 999, if she had to do that. The 'phone makes that a lot easier. So, it's more that it's a good tool for her. (Father of 14-year-old girl, Manchester)

All the parents – regardless of geographical location – considered that mobile phones were a benefit to young people, and helped to keep them safe. However, parents in urban areas felt that there were more risks in their localities, which made a mobile phone a real essential for their children, whilst parents in rural areas felt there were less risks from muggings as a result of lower crime rates in their areas. For example:

Again, fortunately [here], it is actually a pretty safe town. It's meant to be one of the safest towns in the country, apparently. So, touch wood, nothing's happened yet ... thankfully, they've never had their 'phones stolen. (Mother of 11-year-old boy, Devon)

Parents' views: concerns about mobile phones

Mugging was a concern for almost all parents in relation to mobile phones, with 53 parents commenting on this issue. For example:

We worry about whether they're gonna be attacked or, 'cause people do get attacked just for mobile 'phones - and money and things. It is a worry. (Mother of 13- and 11-year-old boys, Hampshire)

However, as with the young people, parents were less concerned about theft and mugging because their child had inexpensive or undesirable phones:

We all have absolutely bottom of the range, cheapest possible 'phones ... Nobody's got a camera 'phone because they're just very basic tools, so I don't think they would attract mugging or theft... (Mother of 15-year-old boy and 13-year-old girl, Hampshire)

All the parents were aware of the potential for bullying and unpleasant events via mobiles, such as happy slapping. These parents had heard about such incidents in the media and through the experiences of their child. For example:

[He] just informed me that was one of the pictures, the slapping pictures, that his uncle told him to take off his 'phone. Yeah, I am worried about that. I wasn't aware that he had them on the 'phone, but it's something that I would tell him that his 'phone is to be used for proper reasons – not nothing like that, you know. (Mother of 15-year-old boy, London)

Despite this though, parents did not feel that mobile phones made their children more vulnerable, in that bullying and violence happened anyway, and mobile phones were just another 'weapon'. For example:

I wouldn't see it as being an extra vulnerability. If somebody's gonna bully, they're going to bully, whether they do it face to face or on a 'phone... (Mother of 15-year-old boy and 13-year-old girl, Hampshire)

We also explored whether parents felt that mobile phones made young people more secretive, or less communicative. Almost half (28) of the parents discussed how they had less control over their child's private life as a result of mobile phones, and were often wary about what might be being planned without their knowledge. For example:

Yeah, I suppose there is the one point that, because you can't always monitor the calls, etc, that you sometimes wonder what is going on and what they are planning. [Before] you could only use the land-line from home. I suppose that is just the downside. (Foster mother of 17-year-old girl, East Sussex)

These parents felt that mobiles affected their children's communication with them. For example:

...she spends so much time on it, and if you're with her or you're talking to her, the 'phone is going all the time and that takes priority, so you can't have a proper conversation with her, you know, you're interrupted. Even at meal times, the 'phone's going which we find very annoying. (Mother of 14-year-old girl, East Sussex)

There were many examples in the study of the 'flipside' to the benefits of mobile phone use within families. Thus whilst most parents were generally positive about mobile phones, many also felt that they led to young people using this technology in private, away from parental monitoring and awareness, and leading some young people to retreat into their own very private worlds.

Conclusions

In terms of mobile phones and family communication, the findings generally support and extend other work in this area (Buckingham, 2003; Ito and others 2005; Ling, 2000, 2003; YouGov, 2006). Mobile phones were used regularly between parents and young people, most commonly used to make plans, confirm arrangements, and notify each other about changes in arrangements. Both young people and parents found them invaluable for this, with many describing it as a 'lifeline'. Young people felt safer when they were out of the home if they had a mobile phone, and parents felt reassured that young people were able to get help if they needed it. Significantly, however, many young people and parents considered that a young person might have a sense of 'false security' in having a mobile phone, and take more risks as a result. The relationship between new technologies and perceptions of increased and decreased risk is an important question for future research. The study also found gender differences, with girls considered to be additionally safe and protected if they had a mobile phone, and using their mobiles more. This reflects the findings of those such as Campbell (2006) and Ling (2003).

There were some interesting generational differences in terms of mobile phone communication. Thus, for example, most parents preferred to speak to their son or daughter, rather than text. This was not only because they felt reassured to hear a young person's voice, but also because they found texting more difficult. Thus in some respects parents saw mobile phones as offering less reassurance about their child's safety, as a text from their child's phone could be sent by anyone.

Young people also considered parents (and those of their parents' age) to be less competent at using mobile phones compared with younger people. Many of the parents also commented on this generational difference (see also Ito *et al.*, 2005).

Most young people and parents were overwhelmingly positive about the benefits of mobiles. For young people they gave independence and ease of communication. For parents, they saw mobiles as keeping young people safer, and offering them reassurance that young people had a 'lifeline' in an emergency (see also Ling, 2003; Stace and Roker, 2005). Despite these positive comments, however, there were concerns raised – theft, muggings, bullying, and peer pressure to get new and more sophisticated phones. Interestingly, whilst young people and parents shared these concerns, they also added two observations: First that in many cases the concerns were exaggerated, or involved young people being reckless and 'showing off'. Second most young people and parents had a range of 'hints and tips' and suggestions for keeping safe. In this respect, most families had 'adapted' to incorporate this relatively new technology into their everyday safety strategies (see also Ito *et al.*, 2005).

Overall, parents and young people saw mobile phones as an essential feature of modern life – for convenience, for safety, for managing family life and social lives. Significantly, for some young people, texting enabled them to raise difficult issues – such as a pregnancy, or bullying – in a safe way. This finding is reflected in the huge growth of text and email services offered by organisations such as the Samaritans and Childline. All the participants felt that the benefits mobile phones offered far outweighed any negatives. In relation to the literature on family monitoring and supervision arrangements, and surveillance (Gillies *et al.*, 2001; Stace and Roker, 2005), most participants did not feel that parent-child mobile phone contact was intrusive or restrictive – indeed, many felt it extended young people's ability to go further away from the family home and do a wider variety of things, in contrast to previous generations. Mobile phones were therefore seen as a key part of modern family life. This research has thus demonstrated that some key aspects of family communication and relationships have changed as a result of mobile phone use, including young people going further away from home, young people using mobiles to broach difficult subjects, and young people being able to contact parents immediately when they are in difficulty.

Finally, the limitations of the research must be acknowledged, and recommendations for future research made. First, in terms of limitations of this study, participants may have been those with more positive family relationships (particularly as parent/young person 'dyads' had to be agreed. Also, the data was all provided via self-report, with no independent verification available of the accuracy of this. Second (and related to these points) further research is needed in a number of key areas. These include (i) research with families where there are less positive, or conflictual, relationships, (ii) research using actual records of mobile phone use rather than self-report, and (iii) research into mobile phone use by young people with extended family members and friends.

As mobile phone use becomes more widespread, it is essential that the issues outlined in this paper are explored with parents and young people.

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